



Beyond Visibility: Reclaiming the True Purpose of Public Health

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Public health has never been about recognition.

It is not about who receives the most attention, who sits on the most committees, who speaks on the most panels, or whose name appears most frequently in reports, newsletters, and press releases. While visibility can help advance important causes, it should never become the goal itself.

At its core, public health exists to improve lives.

Yet somewhere along the way, success has increasingly become associated with visibility. We celebrate attendance numbers, partnership announcements, social media engagement, conference presentations, and public recognition. While these indicators may demonstrate activity, they do not necessarily demonstrate impact.

Activity and impact are not the same thing.

The most meaningful public health work often happens far from the spotlight. It takes place in community centers, churches, libraries, schools, healthcare offices, senior centers, and living rooms. It happens when a caregiver learns about resources that make the journey a little less overwhelming. It happens when an older adult recognizes changes in memory and seeks support sooner. It happens when a healthcare provider gains the confidence and knowledge to have difficult conversations that improve patient outcomes.

These moments rarely generate headlines, yet they represent the true purpose of public health.

For decades, public health professionals, researchers, advocates, and community leaders have worked to identify and address disparities. We have produced reports, collected data, developed initiatives, and implemented programs designed to improve health outcomes. Despite these efforts, many disparities persist.

This reality should not discourage us. Rather, it should challenge us to ask a difficult but necessary question: Are we focusing enough on the activities that create lasting change?

Too often, disparities are discussed through statistics alone. We talk about percentages, prevalence rates, hospitalization data, and mortality trends. These metrics are important because they help us understand where inequities exist and where resources should be directed.

However, disparities are more than numbers.

Behind every statistic is a person.

Behind every percentage is a family.

Behind every data point is a community navigating barriers that often extend far beyond healthcare.

Disparities may appear as limited access to specialty care, transportation challenges, housing instability, financial hardship, educational gaps, food insecurity, digital divides, or a lack of awareness about available services. They may also appear as mistrust, stigma, isolation, or systems that were never designed with certain populations in mind.

Identifying disparities is important.

Addressing them is essential.

The true measure of public health is not whether we can document inequities. The true measure is whether we are willing to take meaningful action to reduce them.

That work begins with education.

Education remains one of the most powerful public health interventions available, yet it is often undervalued because its impact is not always immediate. People cannot act on information they have never received. They cannot access resources they do not know exist. They cannot advocate for themselves, their families, or their communities without knowledge and understanding.

Whether the topic is brain health, chronic disease prevention, caregiving, mental health, workforce readiness, financial well-being, or healthy aging, education creates opportunity. It empowers individuals to make informed decisions, recognize risks, seek support, and engage more confidently with the systems designed to serve them.

Awareness alone is not enough. Awareness must lead to understanding, understanding must lead to action, and action must ultimately lead to change.

Provider education is equally important.

Public health conversations often focus on educating communities, but healthcare professionals are frequently the first point of contact for individuals experiencing health concerns. They are often expected to identify risks, provide guidance, connect individuals to resources, and coordinate care—all while navigating increasingly complex healthcare systems.

When providers receive the training, tools, and support they need, the benefits extend far beyond a single patient encounter. Every informed provider becomes a multiplier. Every educated provider has the potential to positively influence hundreds, if not thousands, of lives throughout their career.

Investing in providers is ultimately an investment in communities.

Perhaps one of the most overlooked aspects of public health is trust.

Trust cannot be established through a single event, campaign, or grant cycle. It is not built through brochures alone, nor is it created by simply showing up when funding becomes available.

Trust is built through consistency.

It is built through listening.

It is built through presence.

Most importantly, it is built when communities believe that organizations are genuinely committed to understanding their needs rather than simply implementing a program.

Some of the strongest public health outcomes occur when community members become partners rather than participants. Sustainable change happens when people feel heard, valued, respected, and included in the development of solutions that affect their lives.

This is where meaningful leadership matters.

Effective public health leadership is not measured by visibility. It is measured by a willingness to serve, collaborate, educate, and advocate. It is measured by the ability to bring people together around a shared purpose and remain committed long after the attention has shifted elsewhere.

The communities facing the greatest barriers do not need more presentations about disparities. They need greater access to information, resources, opportunities, and support. They need systems that are easier to navigate and services that are designed with their realities in mind.

They need action.

Public health is a long-term commitment. Meaningful change rarely occurs overnight. It is built through conversations, relationships, education, trust, and sustained effort over time.

As professionals, advocates, and community leaders, we must continue asking ourselves an important question: Are we focused on being visible, or are we focused on being impactful?

The answer matters because communities deserve more than activity. They deserve meaningful progress.

The future of public health depends on our ability to remain focused on the people we serve rather than the recognition we receive.

Because at the end of the day, the true measure of public health is not how many people know our names.

It is how many lives are improved because of the work we do.

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