



The Essential Role of Primary Health Care for Health Security and Securing Health

Discussion Topic: Primary Health Care's Critical Role in Advancing Health Equity

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Why this is important (brief description):

The World Health Organization defines health equity as “the absence of unfair, avoidable or remediable differences among groups of people, whether those groups are defined socially, economically, demographically, or geographically or by other dimensions of inequality (e.g., sex, gender, ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation).” A large body of evidence supports Primary Care's essential role in promoting health equity. In fact, without universal access to high-quality Primary Care, any nation will struggle to improve health and assure equity. In the U.S., policy discussions about advancing health equity do not consistently include access to high-quality Primary Care as an essential part of the solution. In addition, Primary Care policies are often not designed with the explicit goal of advancing health equity. Primary Health Care is the focus of global health equity efforts and encompasses high-quality Primary Care but also includes public health and multi-sector policies to address the upstream and wider determinants of health.

“What We Think We Know”

How does Primary Care contribute to health equity in the United States?

- A large body of evidence, [summarized in a recent report](#), has established the strong connection between health equity and access to high-quality Primary Care in the U.S.ⁱ
- U.S. research also demonstrates a strong connection between health equity and the core elements of Primary Care, including:
 - Continuity of care
 - Coordination of care
 - Comprehensiveness of care
- The United States does not have centralized decision-making about policies impacting the distribution of Primary Care resources. Misaligned system incentives over time lead to inequitable investments, especially in Black, Indigenous, and other historically marginalized communities. Many communities are left with a depleted Primary Care workforce struggling to deliver care in a weakened Primary Care infrastructure.
- How Primary Care policies are implemented matters. One-size-fits-all approaches are insufficient; rather, resources must be invested according to need. Needs must be established and prioritized through ongoing dialogue with patients and communities. Greater – focused -- investments need to be made in settings and communities that have been historically marginalized and under resourced.

How does the Action Plan align with White House Health Equity priorities and how do these align with global health equity efforts?

- Despite the evidence that universal access to high-quality primary care will be required to advance health equity, primary care is not mentioned in the 2022 White House Health Equity Planⁱⁱ and is frequently absent from federal policy conversations. The U.S. Health and Human Services Action Plan elevates the discussion of Primary Care as a national priority in order to advance health equity and other federal health priorities.
 - Improving outcomes for priority populations mentioned in the White House Health Equity Plan -- such as Black and American Indian and Alaska Native pregnant and childbearing people; underserved veterans, including veterans of color and veterans who live in rural

communities; and other underserved communities of color – will require focused investments in improved access to high-quality primary care specifically for these populations.

- Global health equity efforts by the World Health Organization and World Bank recognize the importance of investing in Primary Care health systems according to need, and also enveloping the health care system in a strong social infrastructure to improve food systems, education, public health, environmental factors, etc.ⁱⁱⁱ

What extension of this does Primary Health Care offer?

- Primary Health Care emphasizes engaging and empowering individuals, families, and communities. It is rooted in social justice, equity, solidarity, and participation, and based on the recognition that enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction. As such, Primary Health Care encompasses Primary Care but also includes public health and multi-sector policies to address the upstream and wider determinants of health.

Questions for Group Consideration:

- How can we ensure that Primary Care policies explicitly aim to advance health equity?
- How can Primary Care leaders better align with public health, community health, and health equity leaders, experts, and advocates to work toward the common goal of advancing health equity?
- How do we ensure that Primary Care infrastructure investments are made according to need?
- What can be done to hold all public and private health system partners - and community partners - accountable for implementing Primary Care policies designed to advance health equity?
- How do we make progress toward Primary Health Care when there is not a national commitment to the necessary social services and supports?

“The focus of primary care on recognizing and meeting patients’ needs (including but not limited to ‘diagnoses’) is the reason primary care-oriented services are associated with greater equity in distribution of health in populations. Different populations differ in the kind and extent of their health problems, with more socially deprived populations having a greater number, greater severity and greater variability in their health needs than is the case in more socially advantaged populations. Primary care, the place where needs are best recognized, is the venue by which equity in health services and, hence, equity in those aspects of health responsive to health services, is attained. Person-centered services are the essential hallmark of primary care.”^{iv} --Barbara Starfield

ⁱ <https://www.chcf.org/publication/primary-cares-essential-role-advancing-health-equity-ca/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/equity/#health-equity>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/primary-health-care>
https://www.who.int/health-topics/health-equity#tab=tab_1
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/health/publication/walking-the-walk-reimagining-primary-health-care-after-covid-19-a-health-nutrition-and-population-global-practice-flagsh>

^{iv} Barbara Starfield, “Primary Care and Equity in Health: The Importance to Effectiveness and Equity of Responsiveness to Peoples’ Needs,” *Humanity & Society* 33, no. 1–2 (Feb. 2009): 62–63.