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Abstract for the Lancet PH Science Conference

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Title: Understanding public health systems through a participatory systematic review and systems infographic

Background

It is increasingly recognised that public health (PH) should be considered as a complex system of interconnecting elements, that can promote or undermine good health and wellbeing and in which policy change can impact throughout the system, affecting the wider determinants of PH. This study aimed to develop an evidence-based and stakeholder-informed understanding of PH systems and produce an infographic to promote dialogue about where system changes might be levered to improve PH outcomes and impacts.

Method

An initial systems framework was developed by consensus at a workshop of stakeholders from core PH agencies and Directors of PH across the UK. The framework then informed two linked systematic reviews (one on public health systems overall and one on early years policy) of published and grey literature, to answer the review question 'what examples can be identified of similarities and differences in the public health systems and policy approaches of the four countries of the UK since devolution'. Relevant literature identified via electronic database searching was quality appraised and synthesised using narrative methods. Evidence from the two reviews was used to update the systems framework, which was then further revised for clarity via stakeholder consultation. A graphic design professional assisted in the production of the infographic.

Findings

The PH systems infographic draws on evidence from 220 documents included in the two reviews, together with input from stakeholders. The infographic depicts the key elements of a PH system (origin/types of policy action, organisational structures and systems, ways of working, influencing factors, outcomes, impacts) and potential relationships between PH action, outcomes and impacts. It enables users to consider: where they are situated in the system; which elements affect the outcomes they are trying to achieve; how elements connect and interact; how these enable or constrain actions; and where users might influence the system to achieve change.

Interpretation

The strength of this study is the use of novel stakeholder-informed systematic review methods, which enabled the creation of an infographic, as a tool to encourage dialogue and reflection about leveraging change within PH systems. Limitations relate to representativeness of the stakeholder group involved in developing the systems framework, although the use of systematic review methods reduced potential bias in interpretation of evidence.

The systems infographic is appended.

Funding

This work was funded by the Health Foundation and undertaken on behalf of the Association of Directors of Public Health (UK).

Contributors

AB and SB led the review process. All authors contributed to analysis and production of the systems framework. AB and MB led the production of the infographic. MB wrote the abstract with input from AB and SB. All authors have seen and approved the final version.

Conflict of Interest

AF was President of the Association of the Directors of Public Health (UK) at the time the study was commissioned. AB, SB, MS, EG and EK received a grant from the Health Foundation to conduct this study.

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