ABSTRACT

People working on behalf of population health, community health, or public health often experience confusion or ambiguity in the meaning of these and other common terms—the similarities and differences and how they bear on the tasks and division of labor for care delivery and public health. Shared language must be clear enough to help, not hinder people working together as they ultimately come to mutual understanding of roles, responsibilities, and actions in their joint work. Based on an iterative lexicon development process, the authors developed and propose a definitional framework as an aid to navigating among related population and community health terms. These terms are defined, similarities and differences clarified, and then organized into 3 categories that reflect goals, realities, and ways to get the job done. Goals include (a) health as well-being for persons, (b) population health as that goal expressed in measurable terms for groups, and (c) community health as population health for particular communities of interest, geography, or other defining characteristic—groups with shared identity and particular systemic influences on health. Realities are social determinants as influences, health disparities as effects, and health equity as both a goal and a design principle. Ways to get the job done include health care delivery systems for enrollees and public health in population-based civic activities—with a broad zone of collaboration where streams of effort converge in partnership with served communities. This map of terms can enable people to move forward together in a broad zone of collaboration for health with less confusion, ambiguity, and conflict.

THE IMPERATIVE AND THE PROBLEM

The terms population health, community health, and public health are often used interchangeably, yet imprecisely, leading to conceptual and practical misunderstandings. Each term relates in its own way to primary care and larger care delivery systems. Shared definitions enable people to create an agenda for shared work, making it possible for people from different disciplines, roles, types of organizations, and age groups to work together on behalf of the larger goal of population health improvement. Often people say they are doing “population health,” but mean very different things. Knowing they are in it together, people working in the crucibles of population health improvement are passionate, but often don’t share sufficient common language to proceed with their work without asking, “What do you mean by that?” or “Is this the same thing as that?” (Table 1). This goes beyond mere ambiguity to strong feelings about the importance of language and meanings in your own discipline or “guild”; words or professional practices that are precious, protected, and not to be misunderstood or appropriated.

This paper doesn’t try to eliminate strongly held meanings or local usage, but offers an example of language based in common understandings and hopefully is good enough to help people move forward together with less confusion, ambiguity, and conflict.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the need for care delivery systems, public health, and other sectors to work together at an accelerated pace with even less energy available for misunderstanding and ambiguity.

Shared language for shared work is important not only for division of labor,
but for teaching clinicians, public health students, and others to work effectively, one with the other, in different settings. Shared language is also important for policy and advocacy, making the subjects more consistent and intelligible to policy makers or funders, who otherwise confuse words that sound similar but are used differently by people in different professional settings.

Coming Together on Shared Language for Shared Work

In this article, we attempt to define and distinguish commonly used terms in a manner that helps people share enough common language to get work done together. We propose a framework of definitions (Figure 1) as an aid to navigation for related population and community health terms. If you wish to view, download, or print the figure in its original large 1-page form, please go to https://www.AnnFamMed.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1370/afm.2708/-/DC1. This lexicon places terms in a relational context—from goal-oriented language at the top to “how-to” language at the bottom. The illustration was created by the authors, a sample of professionals working in crucibles of population health who agree that shared language propels practical work forward in the push-pull of differing roles and responsibilities. The authors believe that the goal of population health is achievable—with better collaboration between primary care and public health, a supportive environment at the policy and health system level, and attention to the social and environmental realities that affect the health of communities and individuals. Figure 1 suggests what such a depiction can look like and how shared meanings can be articulated.

These definitions will surely evolve as new disciplines, methods, sources, and stakeholders join the fray—people beyond the present authors—including patients, community members, public health practitioners, and other groups focused on health inequities. This lexicon is intended to be useful now—as a reflection of current reality—not as an ideal future reality, nor as a set of definitions for all time, generated by all people. At the same time, it incorporates definitions and meanings from published accepted language.

How We Arrived at the Lexical Diagram

A group of US colleagues working on population health initiatives were asked to provide feedback to the University of Minnesota (UMN) authors on an early version of Figure 1. Subsequently, the Annals of Family Medicine and the Robert Graham Center jointly sponsored synchronous and asynchronous virtual communications in which C. J. Peek devised and facilitated an iterative consensus process with a panel of 10 professionals with expertise in population health. A modified Delphi process was used to establish “good enough” shared language, placed in a relational context and describing current reality, to create a revised figure.

Table 1. Common Meanings for “Population” From Different Standpoints

| Standpoint | What Is Meant by “Population” |
|------------|------------------------------|
| Insurance company or health plan | People covered by an insurance product, eg, “members,” “enrollees,” “beneficiaries,” “covered lives.” May include private or public insurance, eg, Medicaid for safety-net systems. |
| Medical groups or provider systems | People assigned to receive care through a provider group or delivery system, eg, “assigned patients” or “panels” |
| Individual practices | People assigned or showing up for care, eg, “my patients,” “panels” or neighborhoods—whether they are seeking care or not |
| Communities or community organizations | Groups of people with a shared characteristic, interest, risk factor, geography, or other commonality, eg, diabetes; children with special needs; veterans or occupational groups; cultural, ethnic, or racial groups; geographic neighborhoods or other communities of interest |

Note: The intersection of these terms: health insurance is organized around “enrollees” or “members” while care delivery systems are organized around “assigned patients” or “panels.” Several care systems and insurance companies may in effect “divide up” the population of multiple actual communities or larger geographic areas into enrollees (for insurance) and panels (for care), which count for the insurance company or delivery system as “our population” even though not a complete population or community. Communities of geography, interest, or shared characteristics may be served by multiple health plans and provider groups, or none at all—hence are also divided up for service by care delivery. This distribution of the people of actual communities across multiple health plans and provider groups amplifies the need for public health and other public and private action in concert with care delivery and insurance systems.

A TOUR OF THE LEXICON DIAGRAM

Top Rows—Goals and Expressing Them Measurably

Health and Population Health

In 1948 the World Health Organization (WHO) defined health as not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, but as a dynamic state of physical, mental, spiritual, and social well-being. This definition focused primarily on the welfare of individuals. Six decades later, WHO specified the need to achieve better health for all by reducing exclusion and social disparities in health. Kindig defined this goal as “population health,” with emphasis on health outcomes of a group of individuals, in addition to the distribution of outcomes within the group. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) goes further to acknowledge that conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age, as well as the distribution of money, power, and resources, all influence population health.
Figure 1. Population and community health terms: navigating the territory. (continues on next page)

### The goals

| **Health: The ultimate goal** | *A dynamic state of physical, mental, spiritual and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.*[11] |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Population Health: The health goal in measurable form** | *The health outcomes of a group… including the distribution of such outcomes within the group,*[11] but knowing that population health outcomes in actual communities are more than the "sum of individual health," as described in the "community health as a goal" bubble below. |
| **Community Health: The population health outcomes goal expressed for particular communities** | Population health outcomes in a specific community of interest, geography, neighborhood, or other defined boundary—sharing an identity that entails systemic influences on health.[10-12] Community health is more than the sum of individuals’ health—the community’s systemic or collective assets and strengths for individual and collective health (*"communities of solution"*)[10,12]; health not only as absence of disease but people thriving as well as they can even with health conditions; and with compassionate support for suffering and dying. |

### Realities that affect and shape how goals can be achieved

#### Social and Environmental Determinants of Health: Influences

Social, economic, environmental, and policy realities responsible for most health inequities/disparities.

*"...The conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, & age... shaped by the distribution of money, power, & resources (eg, systemic racism) at the global, national, & local levels.*[11,12]

#### Health Disparities: Effects

*Preventable differences in the burden of disease, injury, violence, (systemic racism), or in opportunities to achieve optimal health experienced by socially disadvantaged racial, ethnic, & other population groups & communities.*[10,12]

#### Health Equity

As a goal: *"... The absence of avoidable, unfair, or remediable differences among groups of people... defined socially, economically, geographically, or by other means... ideally everyone has a fair opportunity to attain their full health potential..."*[16]

As a design principle: Strive for highest possible standard of health for all, with special attention to needs of those at greatest risk of poor health based on social conditions.[10]

### Background realities affecting determinants, disparities, and equity

Public and private policies, payment, insurance, illness classification & coding schemes, implicit bias, and underlying epistemology (theory of what counts as real). For example, people speak of lives, problems, and troubles—what besets families and communities, while health care speaks of diseases, diagnoses, and codes.

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Population Health as a Goal With Measures

Population health as a goal with measures may be encountered in different ways for different purposes, eg, good health status in a population or delineated sub-population, improvement in health that population, or reduced variability (greater equity) of health status across members or subgroups. "Everyone has a fair opportunity to attain their full health potential."[17] Population health measures might be encountered as a snapshot in time or as a change trend, for a whole geographically or otherwise defined population, or for specific subpopulations for purposes of understanding health disparities.

Population Health Management

Population health as a goal with measures is distinct from the concept of population health management (shown in the bottom row), which is used to refer to tools and methods used by delivery systems or public health, to achieve such population health goals and are reflected in specific population health measures.

Community Health as a Goal

Community health as a goal, on the other hand, defines population health goals for particular communities with a shared identity, as defined by common interests, problems, fate, or those who live in a common environment, and with whom several primary care clinicians interact over time.[18] Specific communities of interest share an identity and benefit from their systemic influences, resulting in overall community health greater than the sum of the health of individuals within the group.[19,20] A particular community might have better (or poorer) health than the larger population of which it is a part, due to strong salutogenic (or pathogenic) features of that community. Influences on health of a community as a whole could include presence or absence of sanitation systems, refrigeration, electricity or Internet, accessible transportation, walkable cities, neighborhood safety with well-used public areas, access to care and nutritious grocers, school attendance, or literacy. Communities are seen...
as having collective assets and strengths enabling them to serve as ‘communities of solution’ to achieve population health. 21,23

Middle Rows: Realities That Affect and Shape How Goals Can Be Achieved
Social Determinants of Health, Health Disparities, and Health Equity
Numerous social determinants of health (influences) can either positively or adversely affect community and population health outcomes. 12,15,24 These result in health disparities (consequences). 25,26 Health equity is both a goal and a design principle: The goal is the absence of avoidable or remediable health differences among groups of people defined socially, economically, or by other means—the opportunity to attain full health potential. 27 As a design principle, health equity means health-linked systems are redesigned to address and eliminate unjust, potentially reversible health disparities among socially disadvantaged populations, while...
accepting the effects of historical injustice. Examples of background realities affecting determinants, disparities, and equity are shown beneath all 3 in the figure.

**Bottom Rows: Ways to Get the Job Done**

**Health Care Delivery System and Primary Care**
To date, the goal of traditional US health care delivery systems has been to provide cost-effective, quality care for enrollees in private or public health plans. Government, military, and commercial insurance programs fund primary, specialty, hospital, and other levels of care. Primary care forms the foundation of a strong health care system. Many primary care clinicians have transformed their practices into “patient-centered medical homes,” or similarly named entities, to provide coordinated, comprehensive, team-based care. These new care models were developed specifically to achieve the Institute of Health Improvement’s (IHI) Triple Aim to improve the health of populations, reduce per capita cost of health care, and improve patient experience. As the primary care specialty committed to first contact, comprehensive, continuous, and coordinated care for patients of all ages, family medicine has a broad scope of practice, a focus on prevention, and a community orientation that invites effective collaboration and partnership with public health colleagues and community organizations who are committed to community health.

**Public health**

Public health is a population-based civic-level activity to prevent disease, prolong life, and promote the health of people in the jurisdictions where they live, learn, work, and play. Functions typically include collecting region-specific health data, conducting disease surveillance, advocating and enforcing health-related policies and regulations, and providing some medical services in response to community need. Public health departments are primarily government-funded, civic agencies comprised of many different kinds of practitioners, using tax dollars to serve those living in defined geographic areas, even as they often and widely collaborate with nonprofit, or for-profit community entities. Differences in funding sources and accountabilities associated with the private nature of care delivery and the public nature of public health often complicate collaboration.

**A BROAD ZONE OF COLLABORATION**

The authors believe the goals of population health can be accomplished by robust cooperation and practical division of labor between care delivery and public health to achieve community health as a goal. This broad zone of collaboration has limitless possibilities for health care delivery, public health, and other private or public entities to build active partnerships with served communities. People working in this zone cultivate connections, alliances, and collaboration with a mutual understanding of the division of labor across care delivery and public health, along with philanthropic organizations working for healthy communities. Streams of effort converge in effective action. Each stream has its own main job, even when there is overlap. For example, the care delivery job is stereotypically oriented to treatment of conditions for individuals, whereas the public health job is primarily oriented to protecting or improving health for neighborhoods, communities, or populations.

**Community-Oriented Primary Care**

Community-oriented primary care (COPC) has a long history of helping clinicians respond to population-level health concerns through collaboration with public health and communities. Essential to COPC is community engagement and co-leadership, whereby community stakeholders identify health issues and culturally appropriate interventions to address relevant concerns, focusing on families and communities, not only individuals. The 2012 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act provided added impetus for such collaboration. Not-for-profit health systems, now required to complete community health needs assessments, often look to local departments of public health for assistance. Recent reports of successful primary care-public health collaborations designed to improve health in particular populations are encouraging. At their inception, federally qualified health centers and their neighborhood health center predecessors were rooted in this philosophy, recognizing community itself as an essential determinant of health.

**Population Health Management and Improvement**

Population health management and improvement, a modern and system-oriented term, refers to clinical and information technology (IT) processes, tools, and techniques available within the broad zone of collaboration of care delivery and public health that can help both achieve population health goals. This concept became well known in context of care delivery systems’ Triple Aim but applies equally well to public health tools and techniques.

There are surely other examples, programs, traditions, or paradigms that could be added to these 2 examples of active partnership of care delivery with public health.
CONCLUSION

The goal of population health is achievable with better collaboration between primary care, public health, and others at the local community health level, attention to the social and environmental realities that affect the health of communities and individuals,50 and a responsive environment at the policy and care delivery system level. To prevent people talking past each other, shared language with common meaning is necessary for effective collaboration. But collaboration requires broadly shared language and meaning. Previous lexicon work in emerging fields enhanced shared understanding51 needed for action and policy development.2,52

The figure is a pragmatic start to common language for moving shared work forward in an environment sufficiently shaken by pandemic and racial injustice so that positive change, previously unfathomable, may now be possible. We hope the figure helps those engaged in population and community health work navigate current reality with less confusion or misunderstanding, while encouraging conversations about envisioning and building stronger relationships between care delivery systems and public health on behalf of health equity for all people and communities. Shared language for shared work is only a first step in an effort to realize a more ideal future.

We encourage readers to share this navigational aid with clinicians, researchers, learners, funders, and community members, particularly when starting new clinical initiatives, research projects, or partnerships. We welcome feedback as to how this figure can be improved and examples of how this lexicon has been used to facilitate shared work.

To read or post commentaries in response to this article, go to https://www.AnnFamMed.org/content/195/450/tab-e-letters.

Key words: population health; lexicon; definitions; primary care public health integration

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