



# What Is Public Health?

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*This article summarises the ideas and arguments made in a discussion paper produced for the UK Faculty of Public Health: John Coggon, What Is Public Health? (London: Faculty of Public Health, 2023).*

## **Two challenges to answering the question ‘what is public health?’**

This article looks at the question ‘what is public health?’. It does not jump straight to a definition. It also does not end with a definition. Instead, it opens up two challenges in defining public health. Recognising these challenges is presented as its own crucial method of understanding the ideas and practices that are associated with the term ‘public health’.

The first challenge is that the term ‘public health’ does not refer to a single thing. This means we need to be aware of plural usages of the term that will not be addressed by a single definition. The second challenge is that efforts to define public health open up questions of values and value judgements. This means that we need to go beyond describing practices and ideas, to engaging with debates about social justice, and where rights and responsibilities sit in relation to health.

## **It is hard to say what public health is, because public health is not just one thing**

The question ‘what is public health?’ might look like an easy one to answer. Or it might, at least, look like it should be easy to answer. More or less everyone has heard of public health. And it is a term that is used frequently. However, it is used to mean quite different things.

For instance, ‘public health’ is an important area of government responsibility. It is also an established profession. In addition, it is a well-recognised domain of scientific research. At the same time, we often hear about the impacts of environments, or products, or commercial practices, or political decisions ‘on public health’. Or we find arguments suggesting that a ‘public health approach’ is the appropriate one to take to address an issue.

In short, there is not just one single thing, or even sort of thing, that ‘public health’ is.

## **In asking what public health is, we open up questions about values: questions of what ideas and practices presented in the name of public health should be about or for**

At one level, a definition aims simply to describe a particular idea or practice. In that regard, we judge the quality of a definition by how clear and representative it is. We have already seen examples of the very different things that people can mean when they use the phrase 'public health'. Descriptively, 'public health' may be represented as meaning multiple things.

We can push our descriptive understanding further by categorising those different uses. And we can do a deeper descriptive dive by exploring the different meanings of the separate terms 'public' and 'health'. Yet it is often the case that the question 'what is public health?' can be taken as inviting more than description. This is because exploring what 'public health' means opens up questions of what we *should* do. It invites recognition of the *value* of conducting and applying public health sciences. And it invites discussion of *social values*; questions of what people should do, within what limitations, collectively to protect and promote health and wellbeing.

These ideas about values and collective goals become apparent if we look to authoritative attempts to define 'public health'. Many different definitions can be found. Notably, what they describe includes a need to understand value-based commitments. Let us consider two definitions to help make the point. First, Professor Donald Acheson, a former Chief Medical Officer, influentially characterised public health as: 'the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health and wellbeing, through the organised efforts of society.' More snappily still, Dr Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, described public health as 'the science of social justice'.

When reflecting on such definitions, we should note that health and wellbeing are not neutral concepts. They are value-laden. If they were not, there would be little reason to worry about promoting them, or addressing threats to them. The 'organised efforts of society' require the sharing of responsibility for health and wellbeing. They thus indicate that health and wellbeing are *shared values*. Such points are captured more obviously in the second definition, with its explicit reference to 'social justice'. But in both definitions, we find reference to practices and rationales to inform social and policy agendas.

Ideas and practices associated with the term 'public health' have a central place for scientific disciplines and methods. But to get a full understanding of public health, regard must be given to questions concerning health as a value, and why and how it should be protected and promoted collectively.

## **Learning and looking to the future of public health**

The reflections given in this article indicate that we can understand 'public health' by looking to how the term is used. We can also do searches and find different definitions. But there are better, deeper ways to find meaning, and indeed to give meaning, to public health. These require understanding of values. They invite us to

consider different definitions, but not to end there. Rather, we should reflect on the following questions:

- What should be the aims or mission of public health?
- Where do we find the mandate for those aims or mission, and what means or methods are the right ones to realise it?
- In specific instances, whose responsibility it is to fulfil the different parts of society's collective efforts to achieve better, fairer, health opportunities and outcomes?