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Doctors should study Public Health

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Doctors do a lot of good for our society, but they could stand to learn a thing or two. In fact, many physicians would benefit from a broader understanding of public health.

Public health refers to all the methods and institutions communities use to promote and protect the health. It's about a holistic approach to health — one that doesn't start and end at the doctor's office.

Although it's easy to forget, most of us are constantly interacting with professionals in a variety of public health fields — first responders and restaurant inspectors, researchers and social workers, policymakers and nutritionists. These are the people who protect our day-to-day safety and look after the health of our communities.

Earning a Masters of Public Health (MPH) can be a valuable way for physicians to garner a broader perspective of the social dimensions of medical care. Learning about social determinants of health can give insight into why the same disease may present different challenges to different patients.

This awareness can improve the accuracy of diagnoses and cut down on the time it takes to identify environmental causes of health problems. It can also provide insights in why certain patients have a harder time following their doctors' medical recommendations.

Doctors are also not in a position to decide which patients they attend to nor should they be. In a global world with travel of people from all demographic backgrounds, doctors are required to be competent not only in medicine but also to communicate and care for people with different disease burdens, socio-cultural realities, expectations, values, and beliefs. Doctors of today therefore need a global competence to understand the diverse populations they serve — which they can gain from public health education, research, and service.

Of course, many doctors might be hesitant to return to school. But studying public health in an academic context can benefit even doctors with many years of schooling under their belts — and the typical degree program takes only two or three years to complete.

Current medical students can also study public health in dual degree programs. Not only that, medical students have a leg up over those with only an MD — especially when looking at careers in administration or clinical research.

But even if doctors don't choose to study public health in school, there are other ways to gain exposure to public health. To start, there are numerous online blogs and communities devoted to the subject that one can use as reference

The medical community has already begun to embrace a public-health approach to some extent. Consider the Medical College Acceptance Test (MCAT), an exam that, until recently, covered mostly the biological and physical sciences, as well as verbal reasoning. Since 2014, however, the MCAT has included a section on psychological, social, and biological foundations of behaviour — topics that have long been critical to the study of public health.

This is an encouraging development. A better understanding of social and environmental causes of health problems can only improve the quality of care doctors provide to their patients.

Dr. Satesh Bidaisee, Professor of Public Health and Preventive Medicine; Assistant Dean for School of Graduate Studies, St. George's University