The Role of the Health Authority in Population Health

A Perspective from Vancouver Coastal Health’s Community Health Advisory Committees

Submission to the Conversation on Health
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Conclusions from a June 7th Forum with VCH Community Health Advisory Committees (Vancouver, Richmond, Coastal and Aboriginal)
Executive Summary
Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) believes that the health care system must incorporate population health strategies within its core programming. Population health is “an approach to health that aims to improve the health of the entire population and to reduce health inequities among population groups. In order to reach these objectives, it looks and acts upon the broad range of factors and conditions that have a strong influence on health” (Public Health Agency of Canada). This definition makes it clear that to influence the health outcomes of a population, it is essential to have an understanding of the interrelated conditions and factors that influence health – the social determinants of health. In addition to identifying these determinants, it is also necessary to have the will to develop and implement policies and actions that will lead to improved health and, most importantly, eradicate the disparities in health across populations.

Adopting a population health approach is not without its challenges. Eliminating poverty or promoting healthy workplaces, for example, seems a long way from a mandate to run emergency rooms and surgical services. Even programs such as childhood immunization and well baby clinics, while critical, can only touch on the impacts of poverty, social exclusion and other illness producing social conditions. The challenges of securing the time, commitment and resources to enable population health strategies within a health authority are significant, given the demand for individual health care services.

As the provincial government engages in a “Conversation on Health” to assist it in setting out a direction for the health care system, VCH believes it timely to better understand the views of citizens on the population health mandate of the health authority. This is important to not only guide the way this mandate is pursued, but also to ensure that there is the necessary support for this often poorly understood, yet important work of the health system. To do this, VCH engaged in a day-long dialogue with its Community Health Advisory Committees.

The VCH Advisory Committees confirmed that the health care system must pursue population health strategies such as those adopted in the VCH framework for population health: leadership, partnership, policy development and advocacy. They also identified key areas for focus including educating both the public and partners, working through intergovernmental committees, and partnering with municipal/local governments. The Committee clearly recognized that the health system must be a leader in promoting healthy public policies that address social inequities and the broad determinants of health such as education and poverty.

The Conversation on Health is an opportunity to set the direction and mandate for the health care system of the future. A recognition of population health as a core
component of the system is important to the goal of a sustainable health care system and a healthy population.

Based on the Workshop, the following recommendations have been developed:

1. The Provincial Government recognize the importance of population health as a core component of the future health care system.
2. The Provincial government continue to initiate, encourage and support intersectoral planning and action across Ministries and levels of government to address the broad determinants of health.
A. Introduction

Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) supports a preventive approach to health care and has adopted a vision statement that emphasizes the promotion of the health of its population. The vision statement of VCH affirms a commitment to “supporting healthy lives in healthy communities with our partners through care, education and research”. VCH also recognizes that the health of the population is only partially dependent on the services it provides. Broad factors outside the realm of traditional health care, often called the social or non-medical determinants of health, have a huge impact on the health of the population and as such are a pathway to the demand for the day-to-day services of the health authority. Poverty, lack of education, environmental degradation, poor employment conditions and other societal characteristics affect health and cause illness.

The challenge for any health system is to manage the demand for health care by individuals, while using scarce resources to support the population to be healthier and more resilient. A key question in this challenge is the role of the health care sector in this prevention work? VCH defines its role as “the responsibility to provide quality health care services”. To be truly successful, however, the health care system must ultimately also invest in the production of health. But what does this investment entail? Eliminating poverty or promoting healthy workplaces, for example, seem a long way from a mandate to run emergency rooms and surgical services. And yet, the health system has a long and proud tradition of population based health interventions to address the social determinants of health. At times it is through its education and research capacity. At others it is through more direct action such as providing housing services in association with primary care treatment services or actively advocating for health promoting policies such as health and safety regulations.

As the provincial government engages in a “Conversation on Health” to assist it in setting out a direction for the health care system, VCH believes it is timely to better understand the views of citizens on the population health mandate of the health authority. In order to do this, VCH held a day-long forum with its four Community Health Advisory Committees. The contents presented here are the result of this forum. It is our hope that this information will guide the way this mandate is pursued, as well as ensuring that there is support for this often poorly understood, yet important work of the health system.
B. Direction from the Community: Community Health Advisory Committees

1. About Community Health Advisory Committees (CHACs)

Vancouver Coastal Health maintains four Community Health Advisory Committees as part of its overall governance and accountability structure. The mandate of these committees is:

- To assist VCH in establishing mechanisms for ensuring public input throughout the region as mandated by the Ministry of Health and
- To achieve VCH’s goal of community engagement

Three of the committees represent geographical areas of Richmond, Vancouver and the North Shore – Coastal area (these are formally called health service delivery areas) and a fourth draws representation from Aboriginal communities across the health authority. The Terms of Reference for these Committees are available at [http://www.vch.ca/ce/docs/CHAC_Terms_Reference.pdf](http://www.vch.ca/ce/docs/CHAC_Terms_Reference.pdf) and a membership list of these Committees is included in Appendix 1. The membership of these committees is a broad cross section of citizens who are interested in contributing to their communities by advising the health authority. They are first and foremost members at large of their communities and are not selected as representatives of particular groups or constituencies although they are expected to be active in their community and have connections with community groups and organizations.

2. Population Health Consultation Forum

One specific task of the Committees is to identify and bring forward to VCH issues of concern to the community for VCH consideration and action. Occasionally, the four CHAC’s meet in a joint session to discuss and provide guidance to the health authority on an overarching theme. It is within this format that VCH consulted the Committees on the population health mandate of a health authority.

On June 7, a day-long workshop of the four Advisory Committees was facilitated by the VCH Population Health Team and the VCH Community Engagement team. Following a presentation and discussion of the concept of population health (See Section C), the group discussed the role of VCH in population health. During the discussion, the following questions were considered:

- Who is ill in the communities that make up VCH?
- Who is at risk of becoming ill? Why?
- What needs to be done to improve the health of the population?
What is VCH’s role in this agenda?

Subsequently, through small group work, the meeting explored the role of the Community Health Advisory Committees themselves in supporting VCH in its population health work. This latter discussion focused both on a general role that might be played, as well as potential involvement in specific topic areas such as early childhood development.

C. Population Health in VCH

The public health teams within VCH are the dominant means by which efforts are directed at protecting people’s health and preventing illness. Core programs such as child and family health, environmental health and communicable disease control are the most notable of these but, throughout the region, various programs offer illness prevention and health promotion services. In spite of the seemingly endless pressure and demand for treatment services, there is a growing recognition that the long term sustainability of the health care system depends on reducing the incidence and prevalence of diseases and reducing or compressing unnecessary morbidity associated with diseases through secondary and even tertiary prevention.

In response to this growing recognition, VCH developed a Population Health Framework in 2006 that sets out a mandate for the health authority to invest in leadership, partnership, advocacy and policy development directed at the broad determinants of health. Even with the adoption of the framework, the challenge of securing the time, commitment and resources to enable its implementation are significant. The Community Health Advisory Committees reflected on the VCH Population Health Framework summarized below. A full copy of the framework is available online at: www.vch.ca/professionals/docs/population_health_approach.pdf.

Definition of Population Health

“Population health is an approach to health that aims to improve the health of the entire population and to reduce health inequities among population groups. In order to reach these objectives, it looks and acts upon the broad range of factors and conditions that have a strong influence on health” (Public Health Agency of Canada). The following are generally recognized as the key determinants of population health.

- Income and distribution
- Education
- Social exclusion
- Social safety net
- Unemployment/employment security
• Health services
• Food security
• Early childhood development
• Housing
• Employment and working conditions

**Context of Population Health in VCH**

It is clear that to influence the health outcomes of a population, it is essential to have an understanding of these interrelated conditions and factors that influence health – the social determinants of health. In addition to identifying these determinants, it is also necessary to have the will to develop and implement policies and actions that will lead to improved health and, most importantly, eradicate the disparities in health across population groups.

The Vancouver Coastal Health Vision statement commits to “supporting healthy lives in healthy communities with our partners through care, education, and research”. VCH currently approaches this commitment primarily through an individual patient/client based perspective. In contrast, a population health approach focuses on the health influencing factors that exist outside of individuals. These may occur both within and between groups of individuals, including families, neighborhoods, communities or geographic regions.

Population health is not synonymous with targeted health interventions aimed at specific sub-populations, such as a prevention program for people with mental illness. Population health is about systems changes (i.e., education system, housing, recreation system) in the context of the population and the communities where people live. Population health is also not synonymous with ‘public health’, although there are many population health strategies that are advanced through public health actions. Consequently, the public and community health programs being offered by VCH, while valuable, are not solely able to address the broad scope of health determinants identified above. It is important to understand that a commitment to improve population health does not always demand a ‘service’ or ‘program’ type response to the need. However, it does demand that VCH recognize when and where there exists a need to improve health status or reduce inequities. This recognition should result in action to bring awareness, understanding and ultimately a resolution to the issue.

The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion developed in 1986 is an international foundation for the population health movement. It identifies 5 key population health promotion strategies.

• Re-orient health services
• Develop personal skills
• Create supportive environments
• Build healthy public policy
• Strengthen community action

Population Health Strategies
The focus of VCH’s population health work is primarily on building healthy public policy and strengthening community action. VCH has adopted a four-pronged strategy to fulfill its population health mandate: leadership, partnership, advocacy and policy development. Brief descriptions of these are included below:

1. Leadership
This involves recognizing the existence of a health issue or health disparity and assuming a responsibility to redress it. Health surveillance and assessment is a starting point for leadership. Population health involves reporting on health status, especially where there are significant health issues and disparities in the health of particular groups. Actions may include developing alliances, coalitions or partnerships, particularly for issues that are cross-jurisdictional such as those involving local governments or politicians. A central facet of this strategy is the development of leaders and champions within communities. If leadership from within the health sector is not practical, possible, or desirable, then the health authority can work to cultivate a champion and leader from within another sector of the community.

2. Partnerships
Partnerships are essential components of a population health strategy that facilitate the creation of health promoting environments and conditions for the population. Responding to health issues often requires action across more than one jurisdiction, requiring inter-sectoral strategies. A health authority can also play the role of an ‘instigator’ of a partnership if it recognizes a health issue where the resolution rests outside its formal jurisdiction.

3. Policy Development
Healthy public policy is a critical component in the move to shift health care from an illness driven model to one that focuses on the health status of the population. Policy development can be a key outcome of advocacy and lobbying efforts and can be addressed at a number of levels. At both micro and macro levels, healthy public policy should focus on population health with an emphasis on health status, equity, and multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral elements consistent with the principles of primary health care.
4. Advocacy
Advocacy is an effective strategy for addressing the social determinants of health. This strategy often calls for a visible leader or spokesperson that can raise awareness and represent the need to the public, media and political bodies. Social, political and economic factors are all potential areas of advocacy for political action and policy change. Advocacy can be one of the most effective population health/health promotion strategies, with the end result being the development and implementation of policy that directly impacts health outcomes on a sustained basis. Individuals, organizations, businesses and governments can all engage in advocacy. The goal is to gain support for the involvement of government and non-governmental agencies in actions that improve the overall health of the populations and strengthen the understanding of governments and populations about the broad determinants of health.

Current Initiatives
The four strategies outlined above are relevant to all levels and members of the Health Authority. It is only through the recognition and acceptance of responsibility for the health status of a community and population that any meaningful progress will be made. The path to be avoided is to assume it is someone else’s job or domain and they will look after it. Equally undesirable is to maintain that it is everyone’s job, making responsibility so diluted as to lack focus, and fail to assign accountability for an outcome. VCH has initiated a number of activities based on these four strategies including:

*Population Health Advocacy Workshops*
Workshops were held in Gibsons, Richmond and the North Shore with over 50 staff participating. The workshops were developed to build staff capacity to engage in population health advocacy work and provided an opportunity to bring together HSDA staff to work on local issues.

*Feedback to the Federal Advisor on Healthy Children and Youth*
In partnership with public health nurses and community partners, VCH responded to a request for Canadians to share their recommendations regarding ways in which the federal government can contribute to enhancing the health of children and youth. VCH wrote in support of the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP), Community Action Program for Children (CAPC) and Aboriginal Head Start (AHS). VCH programs supported by these initiatives have significantly contributed to addressing the needs of our most vulnerable families, and have been key in developing a wide network of integrated partnerships across VCH. The document is available online at: http://www.vch.ca/population/docs/VCH_Submission_ChildrenYouth.pdf
Early Learning Framework
In partnership with public health nurses and medical health officers, VCH responded to a call from the Ministry of Education for feedback on an early learning framework. The submission highlighted the need for a broader definition of health and provided specific commentary on proposed implementation (including how the feedback would relate to existing early child development measures). The document is available online at: www.vch.ca/population/docs/VCH_Early_Learning_Framework_Response.pdf

Improving Nutrition and Food Security
VCH Population Health is working with Sodexho on a number of food security and nutrition issues. Sodexho is the main vendor for VCH and provides food services to the health authority. Key to this work is the reduction of foods that contain trans fats and exploring opportunities to provide more fresh produce at VCH sites. VCH is also working on food reclamation strategies to reduce waste.

Early Child Development Policy Advocacy: Policy Options Paper
VCH provided coordination and leadership for the submission of a BC Health Officer’s Council (HOC) child poverty policy paper to the BC Conversation on Health. VCH is also coordinating a child poverty working group comprised of HOC representatives and community partners that was formally established after the April HOC Meeting. Community partners include First Call Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition of BC and the Human Early Learning Partnership at UBC. The paper will be posted on the BC Conversation on Health website shortly:
http://www.bcconversationonhealth.ca/EN/electronic_written_submissions/posted_by_an_association_or_organization/

D. Recommendations from the CHACs: The VCH Mandate in Population Health

Overall, there is considerable support for a VCH mandate in population health. The Advisory Committees identified the following key strategies as important and legitimate actions by the health authority.

Education of public and policy partners
VCH is a knowledgeable and respected organization that can create information that explains complex health issues. The health authority should ensure the health authority has spokespeople that are available to speak proactively on health issues, especially to the media. The health authority should be prepared to go beyond the provision of just information but develop education programs that can empower action to be taken by others. This means clarifying the impact of practices and policies on health (i.e., a health lens) and packaging and communicating information in different formats for different audiences (e.g., user friendly and culturally appropriate). This includes liaison with
community organizations and providing statements from senior leadership people to provide direction or “drive” an issue. It can also include offering workshops within the community, some of which could be sponsored by the VCH Community Health Advisory Committees.

**Advocating for healthy public policies**

There is a clear role for advocacy by the health authority. VCH has a responsibility to advocate as it has the knowledge, research, expertise and the overall mandate for health that community groups and individual citizens lack. It is critical that advocacy be done for areas where it is clear that negative health outcomes will occur in the absence of a specific public policy initiative. The health authority will need to have courage to step forward on some controversial issues. Further, it must be aware that is has to be selective in the advocacy choices it makes to maintain its legitimacy to speak out on issues outside the jurisdiction of health care. This is necessary because the strength of its messages may become weak if it is too diffuse in its priorities. Also, there is limited capacity for this work within the health authority. There are some clear priorities that should be chosen including the importance of economic status that is essential for individuals to meet their basic health needs. The strong connection between poverty and health means VCH has a responsibility to highlight this and suggest government solutions.

**Inter-ministerial work**

A fertile area for action is with other government ministries. Because VCH understands the working of government, it is in a prime position to guide other areas and levels of government to a common understanding of a health issue and how to work collaboratively together to achieve the desired outcomes. VCH knows how decisions are made and how to navigate input into decision-making. This expertise can be shared with key groups within VCH so various parts of the organizations can influence (“cross-pollinate”) and benefit other government tables. The education sector is as a key partner to work with.

**Build bridges with local/municipal government**

The policy advocacy of the health authorities was more evident when public health units were embedded within municipal governments. This was in part due to the broad role played by municipalities in creating and advocating for “healthy communities” and the “internal” guidance they received from public health. It was also a result of the close personal working relationships between public health leaders and municipal leaders. To some degree, the “healthy communities” relationship between the health system and local government has diminished because of the creation of large health authorities and the more complex institutional relationships that now exist both within health authorities and between health authorities and government. There are many examples of work that is successful and there are opportunities to make significant impacts on
social determinants by affecting municipal policies or assisting municipalities to understand health implications of policies they are addressing in their mandate.

**Highlight population health successes**

By informing the public and other decision-makers about health promoting policies that have worked elsewhere or in the past, there is a greater likelihood of action or adoption of new policies. This can be seen as a role of sensitizing people to the value of a population health approach as well as giving some concrete examples of the types of actions that others should consider. One important area that should be presented is the economic benefits and improvements resulting from public health successes.

**The Role of VCH’s Community Health Advisory Committees**

The VCH Community Health Advisory Councils felt strongly that they could be a useful resource and partner in the population health agenda of the health authority. A number of specific roles were identified.

- **Communication Link with Communities** – The Community Health Advisory Committees have strong relationships within the community and can act as a bridge between VCH and local communities. They are able to bring forward to VCH those issues that affect health as seen by the community and can communicate population health messages back to communities. As community members they have a distinct voice from the health authority and can assist in profiling issues within the community through various means including the media. The Community Health Advisory Committees have already at times acted to organize community forums on key issues with considerable success.

- **Supporting VCH Leadership** – The Community Health Advisory Committees would be able to support VCH leadership such as Chief Operating Officers to make presentations to various local groups including municipal councils. This builds on the knowledge of the health authority but also provides a community perspective and legitimacy to the presentation. This requires a strong relationship between the Community Health Advisory Committees and the senior leadership and Board of the health authority so that community views on issues of policy, such as Aboriginal health, are heard.

- **Linking to Community Advocates** – The CHAC members have extensive connections with community groups and organizations many of which play an advocacy role on the social determinants of health. The CHAC’s can link VCH staff with these groups. Some groups noted include the BC Seniors Advocacy Network, food action networks and literacy groups. In addition to making the links, CHAC members can help foster an on-going relationship and help educate advocacy organizations about the priorities and work of VCH.
VCH Population Health Priorities
The Community Health Advisory Committees also discussed some of VCH’s priority population health issues - early childhood development, childhood poverty, food security and housing. They also identified from their community perspective the types of priority issues that should be a population health focus for VCH. These are listed below.

- Affordable housing
- High levels of Aboriginal poverty and lack of resources
- Drugs and alcohol
- Isolation within immigrant communities
- Food security issues
- Generational poverty in the Aboriginal community
- Impact of residential schools
- Immigration (lack of employment, availability of services, language barriers, isolation)
- Palliative care
- Poverty
- Suicidal issues/queer community
- Mental health
- Social isolation

There was extensive discussion around these areas. Some key themes emerged:

- Build links with municipalities in the area of food security
- Link food security issues to income, impacts of immigration, racism and gender
- Educate VCH staff on food security as a health issue
- Develop more capacity within the health authority to address housing issues
- Link VCH staff with efforts of key housing organizations
- Inform politicians and community leaders on housing issues from a health perspective
- Raise awareness of child poverty impacts with many different groups
- Be prepared to provide direct support and resources to those most vulnerable

In all of these areas, the Committees saw an important role for the health authority and the committees themselves. There was a further commitment to carry on discussions within each group around these issues and an offer to support VCH’s population health mandate on these priorities.
E. Conclusion and Recommendations

The citizens that make up Vancouver Coastal Health’s Community Health Advisory Committees believe that the health care system and health authorities have an important role to play in population health. They see a proactive role for the health care system to address population health issues and to encourage policies that address the determinants of health that may lie outside traditional health care programming. They recognize that this role must be executed with caution and somewhat selectively, but nonetheless believe health authorities need to be leaders in implementing population health as a way of improving the health of the population and sustaining the health care system into the future.

Based on the Workshop, the following recommendations have been developed by the Vancouver Coastal Health population health team.

1. The Provincial Government recognize the importance of population health as a core component of the future health care system.
2. The Provincial government continue to initiate, encourage and support intersectoral planning and action across Ministries and levels of government to address the broad determinants of health.
Appendix 1

Membership of Community Health Advisory Committees

Aboriginal Community Health Advisory Committee:
http://www.vch.ca/aboriginalhealth/achac.htm

Coastal Community Health Advisory Committee:
http://www.vch.ca/ce/committees/ns_bios.htm

Richmond - Community Health Advisory Committee
http://www.vch.ca/ce/committees/richmond_bios.htm

Vancouver Community Health Advisory Committee
http://www.vch.ca/ce/committees/vancouver_bios.htm