

Why ‘wellbeing’? The opportunities and challenges of a new public health approach

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Why wellbeing?

As the world grapples with intersecting social, environmental and economic challenges, prominent public health authorities, including the World Health Organization (WHO), have begun to seriously consider what the “wellbeing movement” could offer as a source of strategic opportunities and new solutions.¹

A wellbeing approach can both complement and benefit established efforts to protect and promote human health. When the focus is on the equitable wellbeing of people and the planet, there is potential to realise synergies in policy development and institutional change.² Given the links between the public health and wellbeing agendas – and the pressing need to identify and pursue transformational change – it is timely to further explore the theories, ideas and practice of the wellbeing movement and the relationship between wellbeing and public health. Hence, the rationale for a themed issue of PHRP on this topic.

The wellbeing field has expanded substantially in recent years in spheres of action and publications. We are conscious that this themed issue only explores a small proportion of a possible wide range of topics. However, we hope the issue will improve knowledge and understanding of the scope, opportunities, and challenges of applying and implementing a wellbeing approach to improve health outcomes.

While there is extensive empirical literature on the relationship between different measures of individual (subjective) wellbeing and health outcomes, and their reciprocal pathways³, research on the relationship between the concept of wellbeing at the macro (or societal) level and health is less well established. Reflecting this, and as a dynamic field where practice often leads the way, the papers included here are predominantly perspective or descriptive pieces.

Topics covered in the issue include Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing⁴; clarification of concepts and terms⁵; what is implemented⁶; what is measured; how we regulate and legislate; what we budget for⁵; whose wellbeing is served^{4,7}; and how we embed concern for future generations in decision making.⁸

A clear goal

One important takeaway message is the need for clarity over what our goal should be. The WHO position is that we should strive for a society that “*provides the foundations for all members of current and future generations to thrive on a healthy planet*”.⁹ We now need to turn our attention to how a wellbeing lens can best be applied. For this, we need to view the wellbeing field with a critical eye, looking beyond the rhetoric to understand what is already occurring in practice and where the opportunities and challenges lie.

Integrating a wellbeing approach with the existing public health agenda is a challenging endeavour, partly because shifting to a wellbeing society requires a significant reorientation from the status quo, with prevailing models of inequitable and unsustainable economic growth, to ways of living that are in harmony with nature. To make such a transition, as the WHO importantly recognises, will require political leadership.

To move forward on this, with our eyes open – where all relevant evidence is placed on the table and we have open and transparent conversations about the implications – will, we believe, lead to more effective and integrative responses to global challenges. We should strive to link social justice, leaving no one behind, and the health of our planet, to the health of each other. This is a challenge we should embrace together. We trust that contributions in this issue can help stimulate and advance these conversations in the public health community.

Acknowledgements

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Dedication

This special issue of the journal is dedicated to the memory of John Wyn Owen CB (1942–2020), an inspirational public health leader with a strong commitment to the wellbeing of future generations.

Peer review and provenance

Internally peer reviewed, invited.

Competing interests

None declared.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to, revised and approved the final draft of the editorial.

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