

Preparing Healthcare Students to Address the Needs of Populations

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The World Health Organisation emphasises the need for a shift in global patterns of healthcare and recommends a focus on population health and the need for the professional workforce to be ready to work toward health equity at the population level. As demands on healthcare systems continue to grow globally, populations may struggle to access healthcare, often leading to stark disparities, such as lower than average life expectancies, low birthweight babies and food insecurity. Healthcare professionals' lack of knowledge and ability to negotiate complex national systems can conspire to even prevent utilization of free, accessible services, especially by those with very poor health.

It is no longer sufficient to prepare healthcare students to care only for individuals and families. Health education programs must produce professionals who can create relationships with and advocate for populations to reduce health disparities and improve equity and health outcomes for all populations, including those that are the most vulnerable. A shared value of healthcare equity must be central, so how can we best assist students as young as 18 to focus on populations, as well as on individuals and families?

At the same time, healthcare systems must not ignore population health that could reduce issues that impact access, the workforce, and health outcomes. Healthcare leaders must, therefore, prepare for the emerging professionals who have new knowledge, skills, and attitudes about serving local populations. Implications from recent research with nursing leaders in the UK and nursing students in the UK and the US provide the basis for recommendations in this paper to move the health equity agenda forward.