

A Team Approach

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In 1915, a Rockefeller Foundation commission recommended the formation of schools of public health to study and promote prevention of disease and disability, encourage good health for whole populations, and educate future leaders in the field. While governments and nonprofits have been steadfast champions ever since, the lion's share of the responsibility for science and education has resided with schools of public health.

Meanwhile, complex new challenges like obesity, climate change, and heart disease have emerged, even as long-standing issues like tuberculosis, maternal mortality, and air pollution persist. Greater commitment and innovation are necessary to overcome these mounting obstacles. As the Institute of Medicine has advocated, improving public health in the 21st century demands the energy of a broad coalition that is radically more inclusive of all the sectors that shape health.

Many sectors have already aligned their core missions with efforts to improve population health. The media industry has become an indispensable ally, crafting creative public information campaigns to raise awareness and clarify facts—to promote the use of condoms, for example, and discourage cigarette smoking. Philanthropy has reinvented itself, forging partnerships with scientists and governments to eradicate disease. Increasingly, for-profit concerns are developing business models to integrate social value and profitability. To paraphrase Becton Dickinson executive Gary Cohen, some corporate leaders have shifted their attitude from “not our problem” to “no problem—an opportunity to create social good by identifying areas of shared value.”

A sterling recent example, CVS Health's decision to cease selling tobacco products, is cause for celebration. I note with pride the advocacy of CVS's chief medical officer, Troyen Brennan, MD, a member of the Mailman School Board of Overseers (see page 34). While CVS may face a temporary loss of revenue, the company stands to gain far more as a credible source of health services and information. By removing harmful, albeit lucrative, products from its shelves, the company is leading its industry to a promising new business model as a fully vested ally to improve population health.

To achieve this mission in the 21st century and beyond, every sector of society must accept responsibility for population health and collaborate with the other sectors to achieve it. The factors that cause illness arise from diverse factors: conditions in workplaces and schools, community practices, access to the right medical care, and the degree to which cities encourage physical activity and promote access to nutritious food. There is no silver bullet, no single solution. Partnerships across sectors—based on the knowledge created by schools of public health—are vital. Together, our scientific capacity is vast, as is our capability to develop innovative ways to tackle old and new problems.

After a century of working independently, it is too early to know how these distinct cultures will coalesce. It's certain that ample challenges await this shape-shifting mix of intellect, commitment, and capital. But with so many new voices entering the conversation, promising new solutions cannot be far off. [↗](#)

