

## GLOBAL HEALTH AND EQUITY

Health is a global issue and global health – the optimal well-being of all humans from the individual and collective perspective – is a fundamental human right, which should be accessible to all. The way to achieve health is to ensure adequate income, food, education and shelter, a stable eco-system, sustainable resources, peace, social justice and equity for all, in other words, by putting in place the basic determinants of health outlined in the World Health Organization's (WHO's) *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, 1986*.

The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) endorses a primary health care (PHC) approach where essential health care, aimed at preventing illness and promoting health, is universally accessible to people, by means people find acceptable, at a cost the community and country can afford. CNA believes that the principles of accessibility, public participation, health promotion and intersectoral cooperation, together with the use of appropriate technology, are fundamental to improving health and ensuring respect for diversity.

More research is needed on the links among global health and equity,<sup>1</sup> globalization and nursing; such research would help us better understand the role of nursing in population health, health care and health care systems.

### **Many different groups and individuals share responsibility for achieving global health and equity.**

- **Governments** have an obligation to promote the best interests of the public. CNA encourages governments to measure and monitor access to health care and health outcomes among population groups, engage society in improving outcomes and access and take action to reduce inequities, domestically, regionally and globally. The Canadian government can be a strong advocate for global health and equity by initiating and funding research, influencing international policy, working to improve the factors that determine health in communities and countries at risk, assisting development, sharing best practices in health care and building alliances for peace.

All global initiatives, from trade treaties to educational projects, should take into consideration the potential impact on human health, access to health care and access to the determinants of health. There is an urgent need for global health research to provide evidence for policy-makers, researchers and health professionals who are committed to advancing global health and equity.

- **Non-governmental and voluntary organizations** have the right and responsibility to advocate for global health and equity by providing networks and resources that contribute to the advancement of health research and policy development. They do this by supporting education, housing, employment, social stability and the other factors that build the capacity for a healthy society.
- **National, provincial/territorial and international nursing organizations** have the right and responsibility to support vulnerable national nursing associations working to respond to local, regional and international health issues.
- **Canadian health professionals, including registered nurses (RNs)**, have the right and responsibility to raise awareness of the root causes of inequity in global health and to participate in finding solutions. Collaboration, cooperation and communication among all health professionals are key to advancing an agenda to improve global health and equity.

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<sup>1</sup> Equity is a complex concept, shaped by differing values; simply put, it's the just treatment of individuals within their own social context.



RNs are the largest group of health professionals and are respected by the public, which will help them lead the call for a reduction in health inequities both at home and abroad. Every day, RNs see the linkage between people's social condition and their health, and therefore, are in a crucial position to advocate for policies that would increase access to factors improving health. Nurse educators can play a pivotal role by encouraging students to use social and political science theories to analyze global health and equity issues. Nurse researchers can participate in the identification and investigation of research problems on issues that relate to global health and equity.

- **Communities** have the right to participate fully in defining health care needs and deciding on approaches to address those needs. Public participation can help planners ensure health care services are effective from the community's perspective.
- **Individuals** should be informed of their rights and about issues that will affect their well-being and that of their communities. They should have the opportunity to work with others in both their community and different levels of government in defining health needs and contributing to policies and actions.

## BACKGROUND

**Global health** is the optimal well-being of all humans considered from an individual and collective perspective. An individual's good health benefits the health of those around them, therefore, benefiting the health of broader society.<sup>2</sup> According to WHO, health is considered a fundamental human right, and therefore, the attainment of global health is "a socially desirable objective – actually a primary objective – on which to focus..."<sup>3</sup>

**Equity**, while often equated with fairness, is integrally connected to values and, thus, has no single definition that can be separated from context.<sup>4</sup> Health equity and social justice go hand in hand and must be conceptualized at the broad social level to ensure that solutions to inequities extend to broad social policies.<sup>5</sup>

WHO's *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, 1986* says equity is one of the prerequisites and conditions for health. Equity is different from equality, so in societies where inequalities exist, unequal distribution of resources may be required in order to achieve equity.<sup>6</sup> There is some consensus that inequity in health status refers to differences that are unnecessary, unfair and avoidable.<sup>7</sup>

These are complex concepts but become easier to understand in the context of PHC. WHO defines PHC as essential health care, universally accessible to individuals and families in the community, by a means acceptable to them and with their full participation, at a cost the community and country could afford.

**Globalization** is the flow of information, goods, capital and people across political and geographic boundaries. Global economic patterns have been developing since at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but today's rate and volume of globalization is unprecedented. Globalization is generally considered in economic terms, but it is also a historical process whereby the world is being made into a single community through the dissolution of local identity and cultural distinctiveness, on the one hand, and the potential for sharing of knowledge and resources on the other.

The impact of globalization on health and other social structures in society is a contentious issue. There is broad consensus that globalization is changing the dynamics of world health, with international trade in goods and services resulting in both

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<sup>2</sup> (Jan, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> (Berlinguer, 1999, p. 581).

<sup>4</sup> (Jan, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> (Peter & Evans, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> (Jan, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> (Equinet, 2001).

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positive and negative implications for health and health care.<sup>8</sup> For example, the flow of trade, people and information across borders affects the determinants of health such as employment, shelter, education and social support and can increase health risks but shared knowledge and resources through enhanced technology can have tremendous benefits.<sup>9</sup>

The issue of globalization is most contentious in relation to how global trade regimes, or economic globalization, may exacerbate and reinforce health inequity. The link between economic and scientific progress and the widening national and global disparities in health, wealth and human rights has been called “the dark side of progress.”<sup>10</sup>

Strategies to enhance society by promoting human rights and meeting basic human needs have been adopted by the Canadian government and many Canadian and international non-governmental agencies, such as the International Society for Equity in Health and the People’s Health Assembly.

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### Also see:

CNA Fact Sheet: *The Primary Health Care Approach* (2000)

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<sup>8</sup> (Axford, 2000; Collier & Dollar, 2002; Gershman & Irwin, 2000; Lindert & Williamson, 2001; United Nations Development Program, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> (Chen & Berlinguer, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> (Benatar, 1998, p. 295).