



What is public health?



A broader understanding of the concepts of public health will enhance your role as a dental care professional, says **Fiona Ellwood**.¹

Author information

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Interest in public health continues to grow across a number of health care professionals in the UK. Public health covers a broad remit but is said to be ‘difficult to define and comprehend’.¹ What becomes clear is the ever changing agenda of public health and the crossing of paths of other health agencies² and the impact of global health challenges.³

According to the UK Government, Public Health England ‘exists to protect and improve the nation’s health and wellbeing and reduce health inequalities’.⁴ The strategic plan from Public Health England for 2020-2025 set out to ‘protect people and help people live longer in good health’.⁵ However, as a result of COVID-19, Public Health England has since joined others to become the National Institute for Health Protection.⁶

What becomes more pertinent is the

growing interest in dental public health from the wider dental team. Dental public health has until more recently been a specialist pathway and only open to general dental practitioners, unlike general public health which is open to the wider field.

Dental public health specialists work in the community predominantly preventing and controlling dental diseases and dental wellness. Those in these roles work closely with health agencies, are involved in research, education, and strategic direction. Oral health is however in this instance the key priority, recognising that it is an integral part of general health.

Dental public health is defined as ‘the science and practice of preventing oral diseases, promoting oral health, and improving quality of life through organised efforts of society’.⁷ Many ask how does dental public health differ from dentistry and how

Table 1 Comparing dental public health with clinical dentistry

Dental Public Health (population level)	Clinical Dentistry (Clinical level)
Needs Assessment	Examination
Analysis of Data	Diagnosis
Service Planning	Treatment Planning
Ethics	Consent
Change Agent	Care/cure/advice
Finances	Payment
Appraisal	Recall

Table 2 An example of fields that may be studied in public/global health

Year 1 PG Cert	Introduction to Public Health Epidemiology for Public Health Practice Introduction to Epidemiology and Statistics Fundamental of Health Economics
Year 2 PG Dip	Public Health Policy Foundation of Health Promotion Introduction to qualitative research methods Research design for public and global health
Year 3 MSc/MPH	Dissertation project Advanced practice in healthcare Elective modules

- Strengthening community action for health
- Developing personal skills
- Reorientating health services.

So, back to grass roots. Implementing and addressing the dental public health agenda in the dental setting although challenging in part, has to be a priority. For dental care professionals (DCPs) fortunate enough to gain a place on a dental public health course the leap will be far less; for others wishing to study dental public health but unable to access the dental public health courses, it can be extremely rewarding to look to general public health. The principles are similar and in undertaking such a qualification the benefits can be enormous.

Public health provides the opportunity to study wider population issues, the social determinants of health, health inequalities, epidemiology, disease prevention and health promotion, lifestyle approaches and behaviour change - all of which can be applied within your role within the dental team.

For those providing oral health advice the broader understanding of the concepts of public health will certainly enhance your role. It will allow you to plan and design an appropriate and effective learning space; it will allow you to consider behaviour change and why some individuals make the choices that they do and how to evaluate and monitor progress.

Finally, what does the training and learning look like? As with any courses there are common elements. Looking across the education landscape many universities offer public health, global public health, and some offer dental public health courses. Public health and global health courses are more widely available and advertised.

The courses are predominantly either MSc or MPH, but most offer a stepped approach: Post Graduate Certificate (1 year), Post Graduate Diploma (2 years) and the full programme of Master's in public health or Master of science in public health; the course can take between 1-6 years in some cases. There are options to study part-time, full-time or via distance learning and online. The entry requirements vary; some offer two routes to attract applicants from diverse backgrounds:

- Route 1 – Traditional academic background, applicants must hold an undergraduate degree with a minimum of a 2.2 from a recognised university
- Route 2 – Prior work experience and a range of previous qualifications.

An example of fields that may be studied in public/global health⁹ is shown in Table 2.

‘Dental public health specialists work in the community predominantly preventing and controlling dental diseases and dental wellness.’

do both fields come together?

In the simplest of terms, it is perhaps best explained by a comparison of the two fields (Table 1).

Underpinning dental public health is:⁸

- Epidemiology and medical statistics
- Health promotion and health improvement
- Sociology and psychology
- Health economics and service management
- Evidence informed practice
- Demography, teaching and research.

The core themes of dental public health practice being:

- Concepts of health
- Determinants of health
- Concept of need
- Inequalities.

The public health principles must focus on upstream thinking rather than continuing to deal with and manage downstream thinking. This very much lends itself to the Ottawa Charter of 1986 with a focus on:

- Building healthy public policy
- Creating supportive environments for health

Table 3 Comparing dental public health with clinical dentistry

Introduction to public health	Oral Health diseases in populations
Health Promotion, theory and methods	Fundamentals of epidemiology
Implementing strategy in dental services	Research methods
Practical statistics for population health	Evidence based practice
Biostatistics	Dissertation for dental public health

Course fees vary too, some starting at £3,747 for the PG Cert and £11,222 for the full Master’s programme, but some are approximately £16,000 plus. The credit values are as expected, PG Cert 60 credits, PG Dip 120 credits and the Master’s holds 180 credits. Many of the courses are multidisciplinary and have international students as part of the study groups which enhances learning. Applicants are also required to provide up to

reins and mantra of the public health bodies. Furthermore, the Chief Dental Officers of the UK have made it clear that prevention must be a central focus of both dental and public health and a key focus of the transition and recovery intentions. It goes without saying there must be a well informed and equipped workforce to carry out such intensions if we are to mobilise an informed, efficient and effective workforce.

‘Public health has an enormous part to play in the health and wellbeing in all countries and the ability to work collaboratively to address inequalities’

two references to support the application.

When it comes to dental public health there is a specialist pathway and an option to study dental public health. Entry requirements in general require a previous dental or medical degree at 2.1 or above and are available either full-time, part-time or in a flexible learning mode. In some cases, the credit value differs to 15 credit modules. Important to note is the requirement for a personal statement at application of approximately 4,000 words. It is important to note that the UK fees differ from overseas applicants’ fees.

An example of fields that may be studied in dental public health¹⁰ is shown in Table 3.

Public health has an enormous part to play in the health and wellbeing in all countries and the ability to work collaboratively to address the inequalities in health, this includes oral health.

As the UK continues through a period of transition as a result of the unique pandemic, SARS-CoV-2, there has never been a more important time to take up the

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