Foreword

Public health services and systems research has gone through several evolutions and efforts to both describe it and create some identity for the discipline. From the onset, the notion was to build on the discipline of health services research as a basis for research focused on the public health system. The involvement of AcademyHealth (AH) (for which *Health Services Research* is an official journal) has a long history in the activities of this area, including the creation of a special interest group focused on public health, with a separate meeting at their Annual Research meeting.¹ The program, Changes in Health Care Financing and Organization, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and administered by AH, had a major role in early funding of health services research focused on public health. More recently, AH has convened sessions to examine research methods in this new area as well as meetings with stakeholder groups to discuss and clarify the role of this emerging research discipline.

The definition of this discipline most often used was first coined in an article by Mays, Halverson, and Scutchfield (2003): “a field of study that exams the organization, finance and delivery of public health services in communities, and the impact of these services on public health.” A subsequent commentary by Scutchfield et al. (2007) attempted to clarify and extend the definition and ideas contained in this area of inquiry and developed the area into what they called public health services and systems research.

Recently, the PHSR Interest Group of AH reexamined the definition, to help set the boundaries of the field and define the role of the interest group.

The definition (accepted June 2009):

- Public Health Systems Research (PHSR) is a field of study that examines the organization, financing, and delivery of public health services within communities, and the impact of these services on public health.
- PHSR is a multidisciplinary field of study that recognizes and investigates system-level properties and outcomes that result from the dynamic interactions among various components of the public health system and how those interactions affect organizations, communities, environments, and population health status.

- The public health system includes governmental public health agencies engaged in providing the ten essential public health services, along with other public and private sector entities with missions that affect public health.
- The term “services” broadly includes programs, direct services, policies, laws, and regulations designed to protect and promote the public’s health and prevent disease and disability at the population level.

The role and mission of AH’s Interest Group

The AH PHSR Interest Group’s role is to support this field’s development, help create a community of individuals interested in PHSR, promote quality research, foster junior researchers, and address methods and data needs. The PHSR Interest Group seeks to further the relationship between research, public health policy, and practice, and encourages representation from researchers as well as public health practitioners and policy makers.

As is the case with any evolving field of inquiry, PHSR will continue to undergo further refinement and broader development as it attracts new researchers. The continued discussion about the limits and nature of this new research endeavor allows, even encourages, thoughtful deliberation and discussion of what we need to investigate, how best to do that, and of what merit are the results of this inquiry in changing the way we go about caring for individuals and communities. This special issue is intended to further encourage these meaningful conversations.

F. Douglas Scutchfield

NOTE

1. The first PHSR Annual Meeting held in conjunction with AcademyHealth’s Annual Research Meeting took place on June 22, 2002, in Washington, DC.

REFERENCES

- Mays, G. P., P. K. Halverson, and F. D. Scutchfield. 2003. “Behind the Curve? What We Know and Need to Learn from Public Health Systems Research.” *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice* 9 (3): 179–82.
- Scutchfield, F. D., J. S. Marks, D. J. Perez, and G. P. Mays. 2007. “Public Health Services and Systems Research.” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 33 (2): 169–71.