

# A Definitive Primer and Prescription on Social Determinants of Health

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Wendy K. Mariner, [Beyond Lifestyle: Governing the Social Determinants of Health](#), 42 *Am. J.L. & Med.* 284 (2016).

I recently received a call from my university's general counsel's office, looking for health law advice about patient no-shows at a campus community health clinic. We discussed tort theories, including establishment of the physician-patient relationship and patient abandonment, as well as privacy issues with respect to contacting patients via email, phone, or a friend or relative. I then offered that the clinic might consider looking more deeply at the reasons for the patients' lack of follow-through with appointments and treatment, including various social, economic, transportation, childcare, and other lifestyle barriers. I roughly described the concept of "social determinants of health," which captures the problems to which I was referring. I explained how our law students working with medical-legal partnership clinics face similar challenges: clients may initially present with significant legal needs, which they are highly motivated to address, but then fail to keep follow-up appointments. The attorney was intrigued and asked me to forward some relevant literature on the various issues that I had identified.

It was easy enough to find cites for the torts and privacy topics, but surprisingly more difficult to identify a clear, definitive article describing the essential concept of social determinants of health. Given the increasing prevalence of the term within not only public health but also health law circles, I was surprised at my difficulty finding literature that explained this now-essential concept in a way that the uninitiated could understand. Thus, I was delighted last week to come across [Wendy K. Mariner's Beyond Lifestyle: Governing the Social Determinants of Health](#).

In her succinct article, Professor Mariner places the concept in a broader context than the specific application that I described to the attorney who called me. Social determinants of health is not a local or national problem but a global concern that calls for global solutions, on the level of other, more clearly recognized and accepted public health strategies to address the spread of infectious diseases. Although public health measures at various times have been challenged as overly coercive and paternalistic, the public now mostly accepts the need for vaccination, sanitation, quarantine, and even compelled treatment as strategies to control disease outbreaks, including highly salient recent examples of Zika and Ebola.

Despite the acceptance of those traditional public health strategies, Professor Mariner explains that health policy needs to broaden, or perhaps shift, its focus to more prevalent causes of poor health. With compelling data, she demonstrates that chronic diseases, including heart disease, stroke, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, have well surpassed communicable diseases as the leading causes of death internationally. The article then clearly defines the concept of social determinants of health, situating it along with biomedical and environmental causes of health, as identified in scholarly literature and international health policy declarations. Professor Mariner examines competing models of social determinants, some linear and others more interactive and layered. Regardless of the model, the essential point is the same: Health is impacted by a wide range of factors, including but not limited to discrimination, education, gender, political participation, poverty, housing, access to health care,

occupation, and agricultural practices. Thus, the prescription for improving population health must address far more than contagious disease outbreaks.

Professor Mariner notes that even where health policymakers have embraced the prevalence of chronic diseases as a significant problem, their interventions have often missed the mark. The current approach to chronic, non-communicable diseases is to focus on individual lifestyle “choices,” such as substance use, diet, and physical activities. I place “choices” in quotations to emphasize Professor Mariner’s next significant point, which is that, by looking through the social determinants of a health lens, one recognizes that social, economic, and environmental factors greatly constrain individuals’ opportunities to engage in healthy behaviors. With that insight, health policy can be appropriately redirected to the underlying causes of inequality and redistribution of societal resources.

To that end, Professor Mariner proposes a human rights approach. The first step is recognizing the wider range of fundamental causes of illness and injury, as the social determinants concept does. The second step requires political forces to align in recognizing health as a fundamental human right, as a number of international covenants and treaties already do. Combining these two steps means turning policymaking attention to inequalities in access to income, education, employment, housing, political voice, clean environment, and health care, while proceeding cautiously with respect to wellness programs and other interventions that focus on individual responsibility instead of underlying causes of poor health.

The article concludes on a cautionary note, noting significant obstacles to addressing social determinants of health through the human rights approach. For one, many international human rights declarations and health policy recommendations lack enforcement mechanisms. Also, countries often resist adopting policies that would seem to impede economic progress and international trade. Those two obstacles are particularly salient in the United States, where we have yet to ratify a number of international declarations recognizing health as a human right and continue to prioritize commercial trade over social policies. But despite the challenges of implementing her prescription, Professor Mariner’s article boldly and clearly outlines an essential concept for health policy going forward. The particulars of how specific countries will incorporate social determinants into their health law and policy agendas remains to be seen.

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