

**From Understanding Health Risks to Improving Population Health:
An International Perspective on the Role of Public Health**

Lisa F. Berkman

Thomas D. Cabot Professor in Public Policy
Harvard School of Public Health

ABSTRACT

Public health research has identified a number of behaviors that have a strong and consistent influence on a number of health outcomes. Tobacco and alcohol consumption, diet, physical activity, specific sexual practices are all clearly linked to morbidity and mortality from a broad range of diseases. However, our knowledge about how to influence or modify these behaviors is much more limited. Approaches to disease prevention and health promotion rest heavily on what we believe the role of government is in regulating behavior, how we view the role that the social and physical environment plays in determining behavior and who we see as the primary “target” of population health promotion efforts.

Federal, state and local governments as well as different nations have dramatically different perspectives on these issues and have consequently embraced very different intervention strategies. In this session, several population health paradigms will be presented along with different intervention approaches. Both successful and unsuccessful interventions will be discussed.

Examples of interventions from the U.S., Canada and several European countries will be presented. For instance, both the U.S. and Finland undertook large-scale interventions to reduce cardiovascular risk. The North Karelia Program in Finland and the Multiple Risk Factor Intervention Study in the U.S. were the prototypes of community and individual-level interventions. They were developed based on very different notions of the conditions that shape behaviors and had very different outcomes. A broad range of options for the development of effective interventions will be presented.