

PREVENTING CHRONIC DISEASE

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BOOK REVIEW

Community-Based Health Research: Issues and Methods

Editors: Daniel S. Blumenthal, MD, MPH, Ralph J. DiClemente, PhD
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When a book on community-based research opens with comments about Imhotep, Hippocrates, and Aesculapius, it certainly catches the reader's attention. Such is the case with *Community-Based Health Research: Issues and Methods*, a new book edited by Daniel S. Blumenthal and Ralph J. DiClemente.

Community-Based Health Research: Issues and Methods is an important text for future public health researchers. As the authors note, public health prevention has moved from treating infectious diseases to preventing chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease. This evolution argues that our approaches must change as well. The Blumenthal and DiClemente volume provides 3 key perspectives on how to conduct community-based health research and its application to public health.

First, the text successfully places community-based health research on equal standing with clinical, basic science, and health services research as the "fourth" estate. The authors make a strong and logical argument that community-based health research is essential for addressing

the new public health problems posed by chronic diseases. As they point out, community-based health research "guides public health workers who are engaged in improving the health of populations just as traditional clinical research guides the actions of clinicians in caring for individual patients."

In line with the authors' view of their field's importance, the book argues that community-based health researchers should be held to the same level of scientific rigor as their counterparts in bench or clinical research: "As public health leaders and decision makers, we need to have confidence in our practices, programs, and services. Yet, all too often there are little or no data sufficient to evaluate the effectiveness of our community-based interventions. There is a paucity of reliable information that enables informed decisions to be made concerning competing options for program design, or comparing one program approach to another. There is too little information to guide decisions about program content, structure, or application based upon documented evidence of the effectiveness of those options or programs, when assessed by valid scientific methods and reported in the scientific literature." It is time for this lack of reporting to change, and this text provides the conceptual basis for that change.

Second, the strength of this text is in the experience of its authors, who move beyond providing theory and anecdotes and instead give the reader clear examples of community-based research in action. In Chapter 7, "Qualitative Methods in Community-Based Research," the reader is given a clear understanding of the variety of qualitative research methods used in community-based work. Then in Chapter 8, "HIV/AIDS Prevention: A Case Study in Qualitative Research," the authors provide a compelling example of the stepwise application of those methodologies.

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Third and finally, the authors make a clear distinction between conducting research on or in a community rather than with a community in a "partnership arrangement." In line with the authors' theme of treating the community as an equal partner, community members write the chapter, "The View from the Community," which reads, "Community-owned health programs focus on the community and cultural capacity of local citizens working as partners with health and academic professions. These programs should be inclusive in nature and be based on community and cultural assets, which shifts the mindset of all involved from one of service-providing to that of capacity-building (true empowerment)." This is the essence of community-based health research.

The authors' perspectives will resonate with practitioners of both community-oriented primary care (COPC) and community-based participatory research (CPBR), whose principles are reinforced in each chapter. *Community-Based Health Research: Issues and Methods* will prove an essential text for students of these important fields.

One suggested improvement to the book would be to include a chapter on the use of community-based health research to address and eliminate health disparities. The benefit of community-based research is the ability to reach people where they are and identify the root cause of disease.

"The community-level approach to disease prevention is based not on a medical model but on a public health model. That is, it seeks to change not simply individuals or groups of individuals but the distribution of disease in the population as a whole." To use the metaphor put forth so eloquently in the text, individual-level interventions and research, working "downstream," pull people who are drowning from the river, but community-level interventions and research seek to find out what is "upstream," initially pushing people into the water. It is time for us to move upstream as a field, and this text provides a detailed map to help get us there.

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