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One of the current and most urgent challenges for public health today and for future generations with literally life or death implications is earning public trust.¹ The importance of public trust in our healthcare plans, policies, systems, providers, tools and treatments cannot be understated. It is of great importance because trust is the foundation of public participation in health-related activities and public health is built on the fundamental principle that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Where there is distrust there is greater probability for compromised public health.

In recent years, trust in public institutions has eroded. Both patients and doctors trust clinicians more than they do hospitals, government agencies, health insurance companies, or pharmaceutical companies.² While trust in doctors is greater than the health care system as a whole, the level of trust in doctors has *decreased* during the pandemic.³ Physicians understand the importance of building trust with patients, yet they do not always act in ways that builds trust, such as treating patients with respect, spending sufficient time with them, giving patients the information they want and need, and trusting what patients say about the root causes of their concerns⁴. Patients do not always follow their doctors treatment recommendations due to lack of trust, misinformation, or barriers to access, and other reasons. And, due to lack of time or interest, doctors oftentimes rely on community health services to educate and support patients health and well-being.⁵ While it is beneficial for patients to access resources provided by physician extenders who are culturally aware and sensitive to the specific needs and beliefs of the community members, doctors lose out on the opportunity to foster those same relationships and to coordinate care for a more holistic and trustworthy approach. More recently, especially during Covid, poor public health communication and mass dissemination of misinformation are two of the biggest reasons for public mistrust. Social media is providing a platform to those in the anti-vaccination movement; this has led to an increase in deaths from preventable diseases.⁶

There are a number of steps that can be taken to rebuild public trust and improve public health. For starters, healthcare must be made affordable and accessible to all ...in their own communities, and with providers they trust. Second, the public needs reliable, understandable information. For too many, the significance of scientific research is lost in acronyms, formulas, jargon and technical details. Scientists must communicate complex information in ways that people can understand, this will help to build trust through mutual engagement and respect. Public health data information systems must be real-time, accessible to the public and with shared health data presented in ways that make it clear how the is driving decision making. Further, data presentation must be clear, verifiable and reproducible.

Some of these steps and many others to reform the underlying structures of public health which will help restore public trust. With additional public attention, political support, and government financial support, we can achieve unified goals that will improve public health. These goals include a future centered around health equity, a resilient, robust and multidisciplinary public health workforce, shared health and public health values, shared data across sectors in real time, and funding and incentives aligned with prevention, health promotion and wellness.⁷

References:

- ¹ Urgent Health Challenges For The Next Decade, World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news-room/photo-story/photo-story-detail/urgent-health-challenges-for-the-next-decade>. January 13, 2020.
- ² Surveys of Trust In The U.S. Healthcare System, ABIM Foundation. <http://www.norc.org>. May 21, 2021.
- ³ Surveys of Trust In The U.S. Healthcare System, ABIM Foundation. <http://www.norc.org>. May 21, 2021.
- ⁴ Surveys of Trust In The U.S. Healthcare System, ABIM Foundation. <http://www.norc.org>. May 21, 2021.
- ⁵ Surveys of Trust In The U.S. Healthcare System, ABIM Foundation. <http://www.norc.org>. May 21, 2021.
- ⁶ Urgent Health Challenges For The Next Decade, World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news-room/photo-story/photo-story-detail/urgent-health-challenges-for-the-next-decade>. January 13, 2020.
- ⁷ The Future Of The Public's Health, Deloitte Insights.
<https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/health-care/the-future-of-public-health.html>