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Public health: A great way to make a difference

By Dr. Elaine J. Alpert, Daily News Correspondent

Health care today offers a world of opportunities, especially in Massachusetts where it's one of the region's major industries. And within the industry, many jobs offer rewarding careers. If you have a creative, inquiring mind, seek challenges, care about people and communities, and want to make a difference, think about the field of public health.

Public health is a broad area of medicine distinguished by two factors: first, it focuses on the health and safety of populations (cultures, communities, societies) rather than individuals and, second, it stresses the importance of finding the root cause of health problems, with an eye on prevention.

Perhaps no other area of health care has as widespread a reach – or impact – as public health. Public health professionals work on global, national and local issues: infectious diseases like flu and rabies, water and air pollution, toxic waste disposal, nutrition, smoking, domestic violence, hunger, obesity, exercise, sexually transmitted diseases and much more. And new public health challenges arise often.

Public health people "connect the dots" in identifying a problem, pinpointing its cause and then working to prevent it from recurring by designing and instituting prevention programs that benefit everyone.

At times, it's difficult to find enough money and resources to produce good public health programs, but the demand for a quality public health workforce has never been higher. Positions in the field include physicians, nurses, statisticians, program coordinators, administrators and health educators. The actual work of public health can be anything from analyzing statistics and cases, to working in a laboratory testing air or water for pollutants, to community outreach on drug abuse prevention, homelessness, domestic violence, or hunger – and much more.

A good way to start your transition into public health is to apply the skills you now have in your current job. If you work in an advertising agency, for example, can you raise awareness of public health issues by creating public service announcements that

can be used by local public health officials, nonprofit agencies, or media? If you're in the food industry, what creative approaches can you develop to help fight hunger? If you're in education, can you bring public health messages to schoolchildren, teachers and administrators, to help them live healthier safer lives? Such approaches are limited only by your imagination.

Volunteering also offers opportunities and can lead to part- or full-time positions. Massachusetts has thousands of nonprofit agencies performing valuable services of all kinds that need volunteers, especially those with a passion to help people in need and make their communities better places. Many agencies even offer training programs at no cost.

To enhance your transition, think about taking courses in health care. Local colleges and adult education centers are good places to investigate, and your family physician may be able to help. Visit the Web sites of the World Health Organization (www.who.int), U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov) and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (www.mass.gov/dph/) for a closer look at the field (especially the CDC's public health training section).

While it may not be possible for everyone to attend medical school or pursue a master's degree in public health, those who want to make a difference in their community will find opportunity, as well as satisfaction, in working to improve the public health of our communities and citizens.

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