

# LETTERS

## HOW SHOULD WE DEFINE HEALTH?

### Proposal for new definition of health

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Huber and colleagues rightly challenge the validity, in the 21st century, of the World Health Organization's definition of health.<sup>1</sup>

Adaptation and self management are important qualities, but a contemporary definition should include health being a human right protected by certain entitlements and a resource for life that is affected by social, political, economic, and environmental factors.<sup>2</sup>

Public health has always worked on the premise that changes to these types of environment result in greater health gains than any individual action.<sup>3</sup> Because of inequities, many of the current problems that drive ill health in low and middle income countries are outside the control of the dispossessed, the poor, and the disenfranchised. Although we can see the therapeutic approach in which adaptation and self management are desirable, particularly in wealthy developed countries, we fail to see how this approach offers much hope to less advantaged populations. Any definition of health must recognise the effects of this fundamental and growing inequity.

To make meaningful differences for those who need them most, we need systems approaches to policy, legislation, and environments—not just individual approaches to behaviours. A new definition should highlight underlying determinants that are less amenable to self management and consider change to

policies and environments.<sup>4 5</sup> This is the purview of policy decision makers rather than consumers.

An alternative definition might be: health is created when individuals, families, and communities are afforded the income, education, and power to control their lives; and their needs and rights are supported by systems, environments, and policies that are enabling and conducive to better health.

We draw your attention to an IUHPE document that outlines health promotion approaches to non-communicable diseases ([www.iuhpe.org/uploaded/Activities/Advocacy/IUHPE\\_KeyMessagesNCDs\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.iuhpe.org/uploaded/Activities/Advocacy/IUHPE_KeyMessagesNCDs_WEB.pdf)).

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