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Establishing an Academic Division Supporting Public Health Medical Direction

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In 2008, the Family Medicine Department in MSU's College of Human Medicine established a new Division to provide support to Medical Directors working in local public health. We will summarize the current status of medical direction, the goals and activities of the program, and how we are working to help bridge public health, clinical medicine, and academia.
Establishing an Academic Division Supporting Public Health Medical Direction

Molly E. Polverento, MS and William Wadland, MD, MS

Introduction

In September 2008, the Division hosted a two-day conference of Medical Directors and other key stakeholders to introduce this new initiative. This meeting provided an opportunity to orient Medical Directors to multiple community-based initiatives at Michigan State University relevant to their role in their communities and to gather insights from Medical Directors regarding the direction of the Division.

To follow-up on the discussions from the September 2008 meeting, the Division Coordinator completed in-person visits with Medical Directors in their home communities. These meetings often included Health Officers, nursing staff, and other program staff. By the end of September 2009, visits took place with 28 of the 31 current Medical Directors.

In the first year of operations, the Division staff focused on building relationships with local health departments, particularly Medical Directors, and identifying local needs and opportunities for collaboration. Common themes which emerged during the local health department visits included:

- Many health departments no longer employ an epidemiologist, relying on their regional bioterrorism epidemiologist to assist when needed. This impacts the ability of the health department to fully analyze data they collect, which could be used to identify community health trends, develop more effective interventions, and target additional funding.
- The populations being served by health departments are changing, which is putting stress on some services, particularly at a time of fewer resources. Michigan’s communities are aging, creating new programmatic needs for health departments which have traditionally focused on maternal and infant health needs. Also, populations that are newly seeking services because of worsening economic conditions are putting a strain on existing services. As a result, local health departments are looking to partners to try and best meet these new community needs.
- There is widespread agreement that physicians need more and/or better training on public health, including the variety of the programs and services provided by local health departments. Informants from multiple health departments shared examples of limited physician knowledge of services or the role of public health in the community and limited understanding of the role of the physician in public health. Suggested topics for inclusion in physician education on public health include: infectious and communicable disease reporting, environmental health, and local health department governance.
- Many local health departments are interested in involvement in research projects; however, they are most interested in being equal partners in the development and execution of projects. Informants from some smaller health departments stated that they may be too small to seek larger grants on their own, but would be interested in collaborating with other health departments on larger projects as long as the project was designed to meet mutual interests of the communities involved.

BACKGROUND:

The Preventive Medicine and Public Health Division was established to create new linkages among local health department medical directors, Michigan State University, and the Michigan Department of Community Health to improve the delivery of public health services. The PMPHD works collaboratively with other public health and preventive medicine programs in Michigan to complement current efforts and support medical direction for local public health departments. The PMPHD also works closely with MSU community teaching sites and other MSU community resources to identify opportunities for program and research collaboration that will strengthen public health medical direction in Michigan’s communities.

OBJECTIVES:

- Support enhanced networking of local health department medical directors through regular meetings and sharing of resources, promoting learning and problem solving.
- Link local health department medical directors with the MSU community campuses and teaching hospitals of the Colleges of Human Medicine, Osteopathic Medicine, and Nursing.
- Provide opportunities for professional development, training, and continuing education for Michigan physicians working in public health.
- Promote learning experiences and scholarly projects in public health for health professionals in training.
- Identify and secure additional financial support for the division.

Development of the Division

Current problems facing the public health workforce, including challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified professionals, has been well documented. In 2007, the Institute of Medicine found that there was a growing shortage of public health workers, including physicians, and that many currently working in public health are inadequately prepared for existing and emerging public health challenges. The same report estimated a shortage of 20,000 public health physicians nationally.

These national challenges were evident in Michigan, where all local health departments are required to employ a public-health trained physician to provide medical direction. A 2007 survey of Medical Directors showed that at least 8 (24%) may leave practice by January 2009, creating an immediate need to identify qualified physicians who could fill these anticipated vacancies. Stakeholders participating in strategic planning meetings for the Division in 2007 and 2008 identified both economic and educational challenges for recruiting and retaining qualified public health physicians.

The challenge of funding medical direction is evident in the varied arrangements local health departments have adopted to fill these positions. Current Medical Directors typically fall into one of three categories: employed full-time by one health department, employed full-time between two or more health departments; and employed part-time.

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Findings from the health department visits will be used by the Division to prioritize and shape new activities. A summary of visit findings will also be shared with key stakeholders, including local and state public health leadership. Key outcomes from the first year of the Division include:

- Division staff has assumed responsibility for the maintenance of the website and listserv for the Michigan Association of Public Health and Preventive Medicine Physicians (MAPPP). The membership of this organization includes all local Medical Directors. This facilitates communication and information sharing among Medical Directors.
- As of September 2009, 17 local Medical Directors hold a clinical appointment with Michigan State University. This connection to MSU community campuses will be critical as the Division moves forward with educational opportunities in public health for medical students and residents.
- Several Medical Directors have been engaged in grant development with MSU Faculty. This includes a project initially proposed by one Medical Director and commitment from four other Medical Directors to serve on Community Advisory Boards proposed in another grant.
- The 2009 retreat of the Family Medicine Residency Network, a program of the MSU-CHFM Family Medicine Department, focused on building bridges among public health, clinical practice, and academic medicine. Three Medical Directors attended this event, which included presentations on all-hazards preparedness, aging and public health, and mental health and substance abuse.

Conclusion

The Preventive Medicine and Public Health Division has established relationships with public health professionals throughout Michigan. The information gathered through its outreach activities will be used to strategically develop the Division, focusing on opportunities to increase collaboration between local health departments and MSU resources and to seek necessary funding through grants and other avenues to provide the support. Planned activities include educational opportunities for Medical Directors, grant and other project development, and educational placements of medical students and residents in public health agencies.

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