

## Letter to the Editor

# The professionalization of health promotion in Canada: a student perspective

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### To the editor:

In a recent edition of *Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention in Canada*, JR Graham<sup>1</sup> suggested that professionalizing health promotion could “narrow its agenda,” negatively impacting its influence within public health practice. However, our current public health practice landscape could be broadened with the inclusion of health promotion initiatives. This letter argues that, from an undergraduate student perspective, contributions to the professionalization of health promotion are critically important to defend and sustain its central role within public health practice.

I am currently a health promotion intern, completing the final requirement of my undergraduate degree in health promotion at Dalhousie University. Degrees in health promotion are typically offered at the master's level; Dalhousie offers the only Canadian undergraduate program. The comprehensive curriculum allows students to explore topics such as mental health, sexual health and comprehensive school health, while developing skills in health promotion theories, policymaking and research. Professional experience is acquired through an internship in which students partner with organizations that serve diverse populations to collaborate on health promoting initiatives. As a result, graduates are prepared to excel in a broad range of sectors such as education, government, health care, business and research, or to pursue further studies in fields like nursing, occupational therapy and epidemiology. Although health promotion is often practised within these

sectors, it has distinct objectives. Health promotion looks at health beyond the “absence of disease,” and explores ways to address health equity in public policy and community development,<sup>2</sup> a perspective that is still not fully integrated in some professions.

With this degree, I will be able to pursue further studies and employment across a broad range of sectors including public health. Unfortunately, much of the public health workforce is unclear about the field of health promotion, including the scope of practice, and how it differs from standard public health practices. Fostering the professionalization of health promotion will allow for a clearer understanding of the field, and a professional space for health promoters to work collaboratively with a greater focus placed on the social and ecological determinants of health.<sup>3</sup>

I argue that advancements toward the professionalization of health promotion, such as the competency work critiqued by Graham,<sup>1</sup> contribute to the legitimization of the field. They may increase awareness among public health practitioners and the general population about the added value of health promotion approaches. With this increased awareness, health promoters may have a professional space to unite, communicate and collaborate. The professionalization of health promotion might not reduce it solely to a profession; instead, it will sustain the field while providing guidance and expertise to benefit others. Health promotion as a profession will allow developing health promoters like myself to dedicate our time, resources

### Highlights

- Health promotion as a profession is not limited to those who work in health care, but provides opportunities to those in a variety of sectors.
- Health promotion, although connected to public health, is distinct, and its professionalization provides an opportunity to enhance public health practice.
- Providing a professional space for health promoters to unite, communicate and collaborate using the health promotion competencies will sustain the field.

and skills to incorporating health promotion initiatives into the public health agenda.

Because health promotion can be practised within a variety of sectors, it often acts as an umbrella under which public health falls.<sup>4</sup> Although health promotion is recognized as an emerging profession, graduates often find that current public health institutions do not embrace their full skill set. Designating health promotion as a profession might contribute to further differentiating it from standard public health practice and promoting new employment opportunities for health promotion specialists. Health promotion work is often hidden behind public health practice.<sup>4</sup> Yet, I argue that health promotion has the potential to further the work of public health if both disciplines collaborate.

### Author references:

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