Chapter 4. The Health Field Concept

A basic problem in analysing the health field has been the absence of an agreed conceptual framework for sub-dividing it into its principal elements. Without such a framework, it has been difficult to communicate properly or to break up the field into manageable segments which are amenable to analysis and evaluation. It was felt keenly that there was a need to organize the thousands of pieces into an orderly pattern that was both intellectually acceptable and sufficiently simple to permit a quick location, in the pattern, of almost any idea, problem or activity related to health: a sort of map of the health territory.

Such a Health Field Concept was developed during the preparation of this paper and it envisages that the health field can be broken up into four broad elements: HUMAN BIOLOGY, ENVIRONMENT, LIFESTYLE and HEALTH CARE ORGANIZATION. These four elements were identified through an examination of the causes and underlying factors of sickness and death in Canada, and from an assessment of the parts the elements play in affecting the level of health in Canada.

Human Biology

The HUMAN BIOLOGY element includes all those aspects of health, both physical and mental, which are developed within the human body as a consequence of the basic biology of man and the organic make-up of the individual. This element includes the genetic inheritance of the individual, the processes of maturation and aging, and the many complex internal systems in the body, such as skeletal, nervous, muscular, cardio-vascular, endocrine, digestive and so on. The human body being such a complicated organism, the health implications of human biology are numerous, varied and serious, and the things that can go wrong with it are legion. This element contributes to all kinds of ill health and mortality, including many chronic diseases (such as arthritis, diabetes, athero-sclerosis, cancer) and others (genetic disorders, congenital malformation, mental retardation). Health problems originating from human biology are causing untold miseries and costing billions of dollars in treatment services.
Environment

The ENVIRONMENT category includes all those matters related to health which are external to the human body and over which the individual has little or no control. Individuals cannot, by themselves, ensure that foods, drugs, cosmetics, devices, water supply, etc. are safe and uncontaminated; that the health hazards of air, water and noise pollution are controlled; that the spread of communicable diseases is prevented; that effective garbage and sewage disposal is carried out; and that the social environment, including the rapid changes in it, do not have harmful effects on health.

Lifestyle

The LIFESTYLE category, in the Health Field Concept, consists of the aggregation of decisions by individuals which affect their health and over which they more or less have control. The importance of the LIFESTYLE category has already been elaborated on in the section on The Limitations of the Traditional View. Personal decisions and habits that are bad, from a health point of view, create self-imposed risks. When those risks result in illness or death, the victim's lifestyle can be said to have contributed to, or caused, his own illness or death.

Health Care Organization

The fourth category in the Concept is HEALTH CARE ORGANIZATION, which consists of the quantity, quality, arrangement, nature and relationships of people and resources in the provision of health care. It includes medical practice, nursing, hospitals, nursing homes, medical drugs, public and community health care services, ambulances, dental treatment and other health services such as optometry, chiropractics and podiatry. This fourth element is what is generally defined as the health care system.

Until now most of society’s efforts to improve health, and the bulk of direct health expenditures, have been focused on the HEALTH CARE ORGANIZATION. Yet, when we identify the present main causes of sickness and death in Canada, we find that they are rooted in the other three elements of the Concept: HUMAN BIOLOGY, ENVIRONMENT and LIFESTYLE. It is apparent, therefore, that vast sums are being spent treating diseases that could have been prevented in the first place. Greater attention to the first three conceptual elements is needed if we are to continue to reduce disability and early death.
Characteristics of the Health Field Concept

The HEALTH FIELD CONCEPT has many characteristics which make it a powerful tool for analysing health problems, determining the health needs of Canadians and choosing the means by which those needs can be met.

One of the evident consequences of the Health Field Concept has been to raise HUMAN BIOLOGY, ENVIRONMENT and LIFESTYLE to a level of categorical importance equal to that of HEALTH CARE ORGANIZATION. This, in itself, is a radical step in view of the clear pre-eminence that HEALTH CARE ORGANIZATION has had in past concepts of the health field.

A second attribute of the Concept is that it is comprehensive. Any health problem can be traced to one, or a combination of the four elements. This comprehensiveness is important because it ensures that all aspects of health will be given due consideration and that all who contribute to health, individually and collectively, patient, physician, scientist and government, are aware of their roles and their influence on the level of health.

A third feature is that the Concept permits a system of analysis by which any question can be examined under the four elements in order to assess their relative significance and interaction. For example, the underlying causes of death from traffic accidents can be found to be due mainly to risks taken by individuals, with lesser importance given to the design of cars and roads, and to the availability of emergency treatment; human biology has little or no significance in this area. In order of importance, therefore, LIFESTYLE, ENVIRONMENT and HEALTH CARE ORGANIZATION contribute to traffic deaths in the proportions of something like 75%, 20% and 5% respectively. This analysis permits program planners to focus their attention on the most important contributing factors. Similar assessments of the relative importance of contributing factors can be made for many other health problems.

A fourth feature of the Concept is that it permits a further sub-division of factors. Again for traffic deaths in the Lifestyle category, the risks taken by individuals can be classed under impaired driving, carelessness, failure to wear seat-belts and speeding. In many ways the Concept thus provides a road map which shows the most direct links between health problems, and their underlying causes, and the relative importance of various contributing factors.

Finally, the Health Field Concept provides a new perspective on health, a perspective which frees creative minds for the recognition and exploration of hitherto neglected fields. The importance on their own health of the behaviour and habits of individual Canadians is an example of the kind of conclusion that is obtainable by using the Health Field Concept as an analytical tool.
One of the main problems in improving the health of Canadians is that
the essential power to do so is widely dispersed among individual citizens,
governments, health professions and institutions. This fragmentation of res-
ponsibility has sometimes led to imbalanced approaches, with each participant
in the health field pursuing solutions only within his area of interest. Under the
Health Field Concept, the fragments are brought together into a unified whole
which permits everyone to see the importance of all factors, including those
which are the responsibility of others.

This unified view of the health field may well turn out to be one of the
Concept’s main contributions to progress in improving the level of health.