

Materials that accompany lectures in Social medicine

Lecture 02 – Health and disease

The definition of health is one of the main issues in medicine. It is the origin for a treatment, social support and serves a pivotal role in the entire process of healing. However, defining health is anything but easy. From the early attempts, health was defined as the balance, fitness, opportunities, but neither definition reflected health, but more generally youth and wellbeing. Historic attempts introduced even more problems, and failed to describe what health is. Then the WHO developed a definition that is the most commonly used one: *Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.*

Although this definition was a substantial step forward, it also introduced a number of problems, as health is a process, which is a continuum of one's existence and not just the state this person is in, the three domains are hardly ever in an ideal situation and the entire definition often became problematic.

On the other hand, definition of the disease appeared more straightforward, focusing on existence of pathological signs and symptoms. Therefore, if a person has a set of symptoms, doctors are supposed to assign this person to a disease category, which creates the background for treatment plan development. According to their characteristics, we can define two large groups of disease, the acute (fast and reversible) and chronic (slow and usually irreversible, "for life"). In addition, we can define stages of the disease, usually being classified as latent (not always present), prodromal (unspecific symptoms, such as tiredness and headache), manifest (at strength of its symptoms) and terminal (which can be complete recovery, partial recovery or death). These two are critical in the treatment plan development and monitoring.

Finally, modern attempts have recently been developed, aiming to expand the scope and meaning of health, by providing an overwhelming definition in 1995, by Bircher: "Health is a dynamic state of wellbeing characterized by a physical, mental and social potential, which satisfies the demands of a life commensurate with age, culture, and personal responsibility". Notably, this definition of health does not involve the concept of disease, therefore allowing somewhat paradoxical situation in which a person can have multiple diseases, but if he or she can function within expectation, then he or she can be considered as healthy.

