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Public Health: The New Frontier

A Health Section Strategic Initiative

By Sara Teppema

Spurred on by a new and exciting partnership, and inspired by the community involvement of a Society of Actuaries (SOA) leader, the Health Section has kicked off a new strategic initiative called “Public Health and the Role of the Actuary.”

WHERE DID THIS IDEA COME FROM?

In 2015 SOA volunteer leaders and staff met with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to understand how we might find common ground between the CDC’s many public health initiatives and research, and actuaries’ quantitative payer focus. This partnership has led to several educational opportunities in which SOA research actuary Rebecca Owen, along with a few SOA volunteer members, have met with stakeholders at the CDC, especially related to the CDC’s prevention program called the 6|18 Initiative.¹

In order to keep momentum for this work, the Health Section decided to prioritize public health as a strategic initiative to be kicked off in mid-2016. They asked me to lead it because I am a self-proclaimed public health geek, and we began to map out what this initiative would look like.

Then, at the 2016 SOA Health Meeting in Philadelphia, SOA board member and public health hobbyist Jim Toole shared his passion and experiences working in his community on several local public health initiatives. His inspiring message, paired with an overview of the 6|18 Initiative by the CDC’s Laura Seeff, brought several more volunteers into a task force to move forward the Health Section’s public health initiative.

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The overarching objective of the task force is twofold: first, to educate actuaries on the importance of public health and how it can inform and affect our work as actuaries—we call this the “inward” focus; and second, to open channels to enable actuaries to contribute to public health efforts—we call this the “outward” focus.

I’VE HEARD OF PUBLIC HEALTH BUT I’M NOT SURE WHAT IT IS ...

According to the American Public Health Association,² public health promotes and protects the health of people and the communities where they live, learn, work and play. There can be a fair amount of confusion between public health and population health; I look at population health and public health as similar. Population health can refer to any population, such as a group of retired teamsters, an active employee population, a physician’s attributed panel or a group of HIV patients in a specialized medical home. Public health prioritizes a different (and broader) list of concerns that affect an entire community population such as clean water, environmental hazards or community safety. In addition, we need to recognize that the term “public health” is a vast repository for many important disciplines such as epidemiology, environmental health, occupational health, nutrition education, research and many others.

Actuaries have been working in population health for a long time, by using data to design and evaluate health care programs and investments in health care services. However, most actuaries have not been involved in evaluation of non-health-care-related data, initiatives and costs (for example, workplace gyms or air conditioners for asthmatics), nor have we typically been involved in evaluating data for broader public health initiatives like improving water quality, reducing gun violence or other more community-focused initiatives. The SOA task force will attempt to bridge this gap from population health into public health by providing examples (which have worked in either population health or public health) that create a framework to prime actuaries to think about broader issues that are more full-community-focused.

HOW WILL THIS HELP ME IN MY WORK AS AN ACTUARY?

The first phase—the “inward” focus of the task force’s work—is to educate actuaries about public health. Our world is getting bigger, just like everyone else’s, and we need to expand our view. It is no longer possible to make predictions about future cost and utilization by simply looking at last year’s claims data. We are learning more about populations with more sophisticated tools in risk adjustment, care management, and research on social determinants of health. Understanding public health can broaden our view in these emerging areas, and expand our practice as actuaries.

The task force hopes to bring to light these opportunities through examples of public health and population health initiatives that have been quantified and have demonstrated reduced cost or increased efficiency. We will be writing about these examples in upcoming SOA communications.

I WANT TO USE MY SKILLS TO HELP SOLVE PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEMS IN MY COMMUNITY!

As part of our second phase—the “outward” focus of the task force’s work—we hope to expand the work we are doing with the CDC, and provide high-level actuarial expertise to stakeholders and organizations in the public health space. Pushing further outward, we also hope to provide a mechanism for health actuaries to get involved in their communities on both a volunteer and professional basis.

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

The task force is planning to build a Health Section subgroup, similar to the Medicaid and payment reform subgroups, to

facilitate online discussion and educational conference calls. If you are interested in being added to that group, please contact Dee Berger, SOA section specialist, at lberger@soa.org. You can also reach out to any of the task force members. All of them are passionate about this topic and would love to share their stories.

The members of the Public Health Task Force include actuaries from a wide range of backgrounds, plus several non-actuaries from the public health community, including Arlene Ash, professor at University of Massachusetts Medical School; Laura Seeff from the CDC; and Lisa Harrison from the Granville Vance District Health Department in North Carolina. SOA members include Julia Lerche (vice chair), Bethany McAleer, Jim Mange, Rebecca Owen, Margie Rosenberg, Geoff Sandler, Shereen Sayre, Norm Storwick, Junee Tan-Torres, Sara Teppema (chair) and Jim Toole. The task force is supported by Health Section Council members Greg Fann and Jackie Lee, and SOA staff Joe Wurzburger and Dee Berger. ■



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ENDNOTES

1 For more information, see <http://www.cdc.gov/sixeighteen/>.

2 <https://www.apha.org/what-is-public-health>