

IFMSA Policy Document

Behavioural and Social Sciences for Health

Proposed by Team of Officials

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Policy Commission

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Policy Statement

Introduction:

The Behavioural and Social Sciences for Health Policy is a crucial initiative that aims to incorporate the understanding of human behaviour and social factors into the healthcare system. The policy recognizes that social, economic, and behavioural factors contribute significantly to health outcomes. By integrating these factors into the healthcare system, the policy seeks to improve the quality of care and enhance population health outcomes. The policy is driven by the recognition that addressing the behavioural and social sciences in health policies is essential for achieving health equity and reducing health inequalities. This policy is a vital step toward creating a healthcare system that is inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of all individuals and communities.

IFMSA position:

As the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA), we recognize the importance of addressing the behavioural and social sciences in health policies and the critical role they play in achieving better and more effective and efficient healthcare. Through this policy, the IFMSA aims to advocate for integrating behavioural and social sciences into medical education and training, promoting the development of healthcare professionals equipped to address the complex social, economic, and behavioural factors that affect health outcomes. The policy also aims to raise awareness among medical students and healthcare professionals about the impact of behavioural and social factors on health, promoting a patient-centred, holistic approach to healthcare. By creating this policy, IFMSA is taking an active role in promoting health equity and advancing the well-being of individuals and communities worldwide through a stronger focus on behavioural and social sciences.

Call to Action:

Therefore, the IFMSA calls for:

Governments

- Invest in conducting research and implementing their results in better incorporating behavioural and social sciences in advancing health and healthcare.
- Provide technical and financial assistance to all relevant stakeholders supporting the promotion of behavioural and social sciences in health.
- Plan and support the implementation of training and education programs for health professionals on behavioural and social sciences.
- Incorporate behavioural and social sciences' perspectives into health-focused and non-health focused policies.
- Promote collaboration between different sectors, including but not limited to healthcare, education, housing, and transportation, to address social and behavioural sciences that influence health.

All relevant UN agencies

- Establish frameworks and guidelines for measuring the impact of behavioural and social science programs on public health.
- Encourage member states to incorporate behavioural and social sciences into educational materials through the creation of relevant frameworks, manuals and training materials on this topic.
- Provide and increase funding and resources to established careers in behavioural and social sciences, with a specific focus on health.

Private Sector

- Support the research and development of evidence-based interventions that promote healthy behaviour and lifestyles.
- Utilise resources and expertise to support health awareness campaigns that are built upon the integration of behavioural and social sciences with health.

Non-Governmental Organisations

- Integrate behavioural sciences into their health promotion and disease prevention programmes.
- Collaborate on behavioural sciences research to develop and implement relevant programs with an evidence-based approach
- Advocate for the integration of behavioural and social sciences in the context of health
- Incorporate behavioural and social sciences into non-formal trainings and advocacy efforts, particularly those focused on health

Healthcare facilities

- Support patient-centred healthcare based on the incorporation of behavioural and social sciences into service delivery.
- Establish capacity development programs, for healthcare providers, on behavioural and social sciences for health.
- Collect, analyse, and report data on the interlinkages between behavioural and social sciences and health outcomes.
- Collaborate with academic institutions and experts in behavioural and social sciences to develop evidence-based interventions that promote better health outcomes.

Universities and Educational Institutes

- Integrate behavioural and social sciences into the medical curriculum.
- Implement education programs for future health professionals on how to make use of behavioural science principles in their work.
- Support research projects on behavioural and social sciences for health, in addition to the development and promotion of interdisciplinary research and education programs that integrate behavioural and social sciences and health.
- Encourage interdisciplinary collaboration between researchers and practitioners from different fields, to foster innovation and improve the effectiveness of interventions.
- Provide opportunities for students to engage in research and community-based service-learning projects that incorporate behavioural and social sciences for health, to help them develop the skills needed to address the topic.
- Create and participate in research initiatives that support the development of new approaches to measure the impact of behavioural and social science interventions on public health.

IFMSA NMOs and medical students

- Promote activities, projects, trainings and campaigns based on behavioural and social sciences for health.
- Educate the members about behavioural and social sciences in national training sessions and capacity development initiatives.
- Include behavioural and social sciences in health in NMOs policy documents and/or national priorities.

Position Paper

Background information:

Behavioural and social sciences for health is a multidisciplinary field that focuses on understanding how social and behavioural factors influence health outcomes and focuses on human action and its psychological, social, and environmental determinants and influencing factors. This field draws on theories, methods, and insights from psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, and other related disciplines to develop interventions that address health behaviours and improve health outcomes. The impact of social and behavioural factors on health has been well-documented in numerous studies, highlighting the importance of addressing these factors in healthcare interventions. This approach has been demonstrated to be effective in improving the management of chronic illnesses, reducing health disparities, and promoting healthy behaviours. [1] It is applied in protecting and improving people's health by supporting the development of public health policies, programmes, and interventions that can range from legislation and fiscal measures to communications and social marketing, in addition to supporting other public health efforts. [2]

Discussion:

1. Definition of behavioural and social sciences

According to the National Institutes of Health, "The term *behavioural* refers to overt actions; to underlying psychological processes such as cognition, emotion, temperament, motivation, and to biological behavioural interactions". On the other hand, the term *social* includes sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociodemographic status interactions, depending on the different levels of contexts, from small groups to complex systems and influences. [3] In short, they are the sciences that study the processes and behaviours of humans in their interaction with their environment through observational and experimental approaches, [4] looking for the measure, control and understanding of health and disease processes. The subjects of these sciences range from global trade and conflict to the neurochemical substrates of memory and motivation. [5]

Behavioural and social sciences draw on an interdisciplinary blend of subjects such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology, providing a comprehensive understanding of the human experience. While the field encompasses a broad range of areas, it is defined by specific characteristics. For instance, a behavioural scientist is an individual whose training focuses on studying the behaviours of both groups and individuals. This enables scientists to understand the impact of these behaviours on personal development, relationships, and the ability to predict potential future behaviours and their societal impact as a whole. [6]

2. Behavioural and Social Sciences as Determinants of Health: How they impact health

Human behaviour always has an impact on health outcomes. Behavioural and social sciences investigate the social, cognitive, and environmental drivers and barriers that influence health-related behaviours. In addition, behavioural evidence on what influences behaviours at the individual, community, and population level can lead to an improvement in the design of policies and programmes, communications, and products and services targeted towards achieving better health for all. Applying behavioural and social sciences requires a multidisciplinary approach and the adoption of theory, research, methods, practical techniques and tools drawn from sociology, psychology, anthropology, communications, marketing, economics, systems thinking and design thinking, among others. Behavioural and social sciences evidence can lead to and complement other public health efforts that are aimed at the non-medical factors

that influence health outcomes. [7]

In addition, behavioural factors at the individual, collective and institutional levels, shaped by social, economic and environmental determinants of health, many of which cannot be amended by individual action alone, contribute to increasing trends in both non communicable and communicable diseases and their risk factors, injuries, and health emergency risks in addition to other health challenges that pose a significant challenge to health systems and increase disease burden globally. [8]

On an individual level, maintaining a healthy behaviour, often required to complement treatment or simply maintain good health, is hard and does not occur similarly in different people. The approach that needs to be used to elicit the adoption of the new behaviour will greatly vary depending on the patient one is dealing with. [9 & 10]

Having said that, the role of behavioural and social sciences as determinants of health is very palpable and undeniable. These sciences make up the backbone of the development of medical care to reach healthier lifestyles with lower illness and mortality and better life expectancy and well-being. [11]

3. Global Statistics on Interlinkages between behavioural and social sciences, and Health

According to the report by the WHO Director General on Behavioural Sciences for Better Health Initiative, it was noted that, in 2020, the WHO Secretariat conducted an external assessment of WHO publications between 2015 and 2020. In 2021, a behavioural science global survey took place among WHO staff members, with a total of 1256 respondents from headquarters, and regional and country offices. The assessment results showed that approximately 75% of WHO documents include keywords related to behavioural sciences but only 30% contain a prominent application of behavioural insights and thus the conclusion was that behavioural sciences should be given more explicit and thorough consideration in order to contribute to health policies and programmes. [12]

4. Relevance of behavioural and social sciences to public health

According to the WHO, elements that influence behaviours can lead to an improvement in the design of policies and programmes, communications, and products and services targeted towards achieving better health for all, in addition to complementing other public health efforts focused on non-medical factors that influence health outcomes". [13]

As mentioned before, health achievements and life expectancy have improved due to advances in public health. However, the current approach does not cover all the health' spheres, nor does it focus on behavioural risk factors. [14] It was predicted that more than half of the diseases that would contribute to global disability would be the consequence of behavioural factors. [15] Therefore, interventions must be on multiple levels, including individual, interpersonal, familiar, institutional, community/social, and political. [16]

By integrating this perspective, the collaboration extends to more partners, and public health research and practice is strengthened by the disciplines represented among the social and behavioural sciences. Thus, this collective effort contributes to the safety and health of people. [17]

In addition, in public health, behavioural science theory and methods are specifically helpful for the practical implementation of policies and strategies targeting context-specific behaviours, in addition to evaluating and monitoring the effect of interventions in specific contexts. Although behaviours can be influenced through a number of policies, interventions and communications, behavioural science theory is still underused in public health. [18]

5. How can work on behavioural and social sciences lead to better health?

To tackle risk factors related to behaviour, complex interactions among cognitive, emotional, social and environmental drivers, [19] we must include the behavioural sciences, but also social sciences such as

anthropology, social psychology, economics, systems thinking, social marketing, human-centred science of design and implementation. The multidisciplinary approaches enable behaviour change by integrating the social and behavioural sciences. [20]

Work on them can lead to better health by investigating the cognitive, social, and environmental drivers and barriers that influence health-related behaviours. Evidence on what influences behaviours at the individual, community, and population level can improve the effectiveness of public health interventions. [21] The work on behavioural and social sciences can increase recognition on the impact that social context has on health behaviours and chronic disease morbidity and mortality. [22]

By shifting the focus of policy-making more towards social and environmental factors, rather than solely knowledge and awareness, it is then possible to influence behaviours and promote health. [23]

6. Global efforts on behavioural and social sciences for health:

Certain health policies underestimate the importance of social norms and the fact that our behaviours are influenced by our perceptions of how other people think and act. Some interventions focus only on the human factor, without giving attention to environmental and structural issues that determine what options are available and how these options are presented to the population. Too often, considerations around behaviours are only discussed in the implementation phase; but effective health policies and strategies require raising critical behavioural issues and questions much earlier, when broad policy objectives are discussed and designed. If we expect policymakers and practitioners to increase the use of behavioural and social sciences, the global community of experts needs to provide easy access to evidence, tools, expertise and examples of use. [24]

Recently, there are many global efforts on behavioural and social sciences for health. One of them is the Behavioural Sciences for Better Health Initiative by the World Health Organization (WHO) to investigate the cognitive, social, and environmental drivers and barriers that influence health-related behaviors. [25] It aims to promote and enable the systematic use of behavioural and social sciences in public health across the work of WHO and that of its partners. [26]

Another example is the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Behavioural Insights and Social Action (BISA) Programme, which uses behavioural science to design and implement social interventions that can improve people's lives. [27]

There is also the Rockefeller Foundation's behavioural Insights for Policy Design, a program that uses behavioural science to inform policy decisions and design more effective policies. It focuses on identifying behavioural barriers to policy implementation and developing interventions to overcome these barriers. The Foundation has partnered with Ideas42, a non-profit behavioural science design and consulting firm, to bring together creative artists and researchers to address complex social problems through behavioural insights. [28] The program also aims to increase the use of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) to evaluate the effectiveness of policy interventions and has published reports and briefs on the use of behavioural insights in policy design. [29]

Furthermore, there is also the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), an international non-profit organisation that promotes evidence-informed equitable, inclusive, and sustainable development. Supports the use of rigorous evaluation methods to measure the impact of social interventions and inform decision-making, offering comprehensive support and diverse approaches. [30]

The use of behavioural and social sciences to improve health is a growing field. As we learn more about how human behaviour influences health, we will be able to develop more effective interventions to improve health outcomes around the world. [31]

7. Role of Youth and medical students

Behavioural and social sciences rely heavily on advocacy for promotion and awareness. To create impact, the least politicised and most driven members of society need to be involved in this advocacy. As such, youth tick all the boxes for the perfect advocates one can consider in the realm of behavioural and social sciences advocacy. [32]

Having said that, another advantage of youth in advocacy is their presence where it matters. Young people are at the heart of families, present in schools, and universities, and thus have in their surrounding a great number of people they can impact. Being advocates, these youth are also affected by the cause they raise awareness about and are usually seen to adopt different behaviour leading to a healthier lifestyle. [33, 34, 35]

Medical students fall into the category of specialised youth. They are more credible in their advocacy as these falls in the realm of their studies. As such, campaigns led by medical students tend to be heard by policy makers and taken into consideration, as they are the future of healthcare. [36] Medical students are also in direct contact with patients, and in the frontlines of individuals who can impact the behavioural changes in said patients. Hence, it is their responsibility to work on applying behavioural and social science knowledge they acquire in shaping patients towards a better health. [37]

8. Behavioural and social sciences in the medical curriculum

In regard to the inclusion of behavioural and social sciences in the medical curriculum, it has been highlighted that educating medical students about behavioural and social sciences (BSS) is hampered by students' failure to recognize the relevance of BSS to their clinical practice, despite the fact that the main implication of the association between morbidity and these behavioural and social determinants is that they are apparent nonspecific risk indicators for disease. [38]

Incorporating behavioural and social sciences into the medical education is crucial based on the fact that behavioural and social science research and practice have resulted in significant improvements in the public's health, with reduced tobacco use and diet modifications being two prominent examples. In addition, our deepening understanding of mind/body interactions and effective methods of amending health behaviour have also led to health improvements. For example, Biobehavioural approaches are effective in treating mental illness and substance abuse, and in managing chronic illness. The sights of behavioural and social sciences in health care are based on learning theory's contribution to neurological disease, memory research, gene-environment interactions, and impacts of social integration on health. The sciences that undergird these areas of improvement and promise are important requirements in the training of future physicians. [39]

According to research about the Indian medical curriculum, due to the fact that behaviour, social, psychological, and biological factors impact health and disease, it is widely recognized that behavioural and social sciences should become an integral part of medical education. However, despite the critical role of behaviour and social science in health-care performance, these have not been effectively incorporated in the medical and allied health sciences curriculum, highlighting the urgent need to include them in medical education and training, in order to help future doctors to practise with a fully informed medical system. [40]

9. Behavioural and social sciences for post-pandemic recovery

Behavioural and social sciences can play an essential role in the post-pandemic recovery effort. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant mental health challenges, social isolation, and economic

disruption, which have had a severe impact on individuals and communities alike. The use of behavioural and social science approaches provides a valuable framework for understanding and addressing the effects of the pandemic on individuals' behaviour and social interactions. By using evidence-based strategies that draw on a range of disciplines, policymakers can design interventions that address the unique challenges facing communities and improve public health outcomes. Behavioural and social science can also support efforts to rebuild trust in public health institutions and promote vaccine uptake. As we navigate the post-pandemic recovery, utilising the insights gained from behavioural and social science research can help ensure a more equitable and resilient future for all. [41]

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic, representing a massive global health crisis, requires large-scale behaviour change and places significant psychological burdens on individuals. Therefore, insights from the social and behavioural sciences can be used to help align human behaviour with the recommendations of epidemiologists and public health experts. This can include efforts on navigating threats, social and cultural influences on behaviour, science communication, moral decision-making, leadership, and stress and coping. [42]

Furthermore, with the increased focus on pandemic preparedness, prevention and response, the WHO Technical Advisory Group on Behavioural Insights and Sciences for Health recommends considering the inclusion of the uses of behavioural and social sciences in pandemic prevention, preparedness and response at relevant places in the international instrument. This can include, but is not limited to, informed political and public health leadership, the choice of legislation for mandatory vaccination, financial measures for supporting self-isolation, guidance and scripts for contact tracing, and tailored communications for communities in vulnerable settings to minimise health inequalities. This should be coupled with the inclusion of at least one article focusing on critical behavioural and social actions for pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. An example of this can be to "intensify and target risk communication, strengthen community engagement, empowerment and support, addressing community concerns, combating misinformation and building trust" as highlighted by the WHO Director-General in his charge to countries at the World Health Assembly in 2021. [43]

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