

JANET COLLINS, PhD

Director, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Overview of the 20-year history of the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion from a focus on individual behaviors to today's social policy initiatives.

Transcript of video interview produced by the Directors of Health Promotion and Education, 2009.

I started doing work on asthma with children and trying to figure out how to evaluate quality programs. And I was working on a project funded by CDC. And one thing led to another, and I was invited to apply. So, I guess the rest of the story is told at this point.

But, yeah, sort of meshing educational psychology with measurement and from measurement to health promotion was the path.

Yeah. Well, this is our 20th anniversary year for the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. And as we look back over those 20 years, the foundation really was a foundation of health education and health promotion. There was a prior center of health promotion and education that was sort of grouped together with a couple of other divisions of diabetes and nutrition. And they came together under this new center rubric.

But Dennis Tolsma, people like Marshall Kreuter, Jeff Copeland, and others, were at the very beginning of this when it came together. So, very much the roots of health education sort of embedded in who we are.

When the Center came into formation, Jeff Copeland describes it as sort of a scene set where you prop up a division called cancer and a division called diabetes and so on. But there wasn't a lot behind it because the money just wasn't there. And then the work after having really setting the foundation and seeing where we wanted to go from a vision perspective, the work was really establishing the resources to make that a reality.

I would say that our Center evolved from that foundation of health education to today where health education is still a mainstay of our work. But as the field has evolved, so has our Center's work evolved. And in some ways, I hope our Center has contributed to that evolution of health education and health promotion. We've evolved from a time where we understood health education to be knowledge based, skills based, and that's still important to this day. But the evolution has really been bringing into bear the understandings of policy promotion, the understandings of the environment, and the influences that those major drivers play in terms of individual choice. So, it's been a path of evolution along with the evolution of the whole field.

The history of our development in the Center is one of growing resources but also changing focus in our activities. And you can sort of see that in the areas like nutrition and areas like tobacco control where health education has just been a vital force in our work. And the evolution has been focus, first on knowledge-based areas and then a movement over time to really policy interventions.

So, reflecting over our 20-year history, health education has been a mainstay throughout. But the actual activities that we are engaged in have changed dramatically. In the earlier days, really a focus on individual behaviors, knowledge and skills building, and now, more in the present day, looking at what are the major societal influences on people's ability to make healthy choices. And those societal influences are really policy, the social and physical environment, and making it possible for the healthy choices to be easy choices.

Throughout all of this work across the decades, of course, the partnerships with the state efforts have absolutely been key. And many times, the states are leading the efforts in health education and health promotion. Very much true in tobacco control that we were learning from what was happening on the ground at the local and state level, and then picking it up and trying to share it nationally so others could benefit from those learnings. Absolutely key partnerships between local, state, and national public health efforts.

Looking toward the future now, we've seen such an evolution in health education and health promotion over the past couple of decades. But what is the future going to bring in this arena? And I think we're very excited about work in social determinants of health and really thinking about what other disciplines like agriculture and transportation, housing, employment, what other areas of the social fabric can really contribute to health in important ways. Because I think we're seeing that we can't accomplish what needs to be accomplished by health professionals alone but by really drawing in professionals from these other areas and helping them understand how their policies and their decisions and programs really affect the health of a nation.