

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF HEALTH DEFINITION? A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR HEALTH AND HEALTH STATUS

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Abstract

Health is complex, multidimensional and hard to define. Health is a separate concept from health status since health is dynamic and health status suggests the ability to measure. Some of the dimensions of health appear in definitions and literature. The inability to define health may lead to some problems in measuring health status as a statistical variable, a perspective that underlines the importance of a clear definition, as complete as possible, appropriate to the context for which the analysis is made. Current definitions do not address all dimensions of health. More broad definitions that capture more dimensions of health are essential to support health policy decision-making and researchers. Several analyses use some variables related to dimensions of health (e.g. extracted from WHO definition - social, mental and physical). A clearer definition makes it easier monitor and meet the objectives. In this study, the health and health status are defined first, and then some dimensions from definitions of health and from literature are debated. The results consist in this collection of dimensions: physical, mental, social, functional, subjective, religious, environmental, emotional, intellectual. Definition created is as follows: "Health is a complex, multidimensional concept that can be affected by a multitude of factors such as physical, social, mental, religious, intellectual, subjective, environmental, and broadly it links to the idea of pain or suffering in any way, but also the well-being and happiness, i.e. holiness for those who have it.". It is important to have a complex definition to support health policy decision-making, which leads towards improving the health status of the population.

Keywords: *health dimensions; health statistics; health policy decision-making; health status.*

JEL Classification: I10.

1. INTRODUCTION

Health is a complex, hard-to-define concept with many dimensions, and capturing all aspects in a single definition is challenging (Van Druten *et al.*, 2022). According to the literature, several definitions (World Health Organization, 1948; Ahmed, Coelho and Kolker, 1979; World Health Organization, 1984), and approaches (Brooks, 1994; Ebrahim and Bowling,

2005; Stokes, Noren and Shindell, 1982) are available, perspectives that underline the fact that it is difficult to provide a definition that is valid in any context. That is ideal, but when it comes to health, it is more difficult to provide a fully comprehensive definition. A popular, valid and debated definition is the one offered by the World Health Organization (WHO), which states in its 1948 Constitution: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organization, 1948). This definition is also used in the Dictionary of Health Economics (Culyer, 2005), which indicates that it is valid and well accepted. It is noted that few dimensions are included – physical, mental and social. In contrast to the WHO (1948) definition, Hippocrates defined health as a steady state between body, mind and environment. Health is different from health status. The concept of “health status” suggests the notion of measurement, while “health” is a general, dynamic concept. Some dimensions can also be identified from definitions and approaches to health status, which is also a complex concept.

2. HEALTH DIMENSIONS

The fact that health status is a complex concept can be proven by the following definitions that deal with the concept differently, but also capture different types of measurement: „Health status refers to your medical conditions (both physical and mental health), claims experience, receipt of health care, medical history, genetic information, evidence of insurability, and disability” (Healthcare.gov, 2024), „Health status is a measure of how people perceive their health - rating it as excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). It is observed that health status has many directions, it can include lots of indicators. Stewart and Ware (1992) stated that health status is a multidimensional concept, which requires several indicators that are usually included in health surveys, and which may be questions about the incidence and prevalence of disease, the state of physical, cognitive, emotional and social functioning, disability. To shape a more comprehensive definition of health, it is also necessary to consider some existing health dimension schemes that are available. Most of them consider already the three dimensions from WHO definition.

In terms of terminology, according to the Dictionary of Health Economics (2005), a health dimension is a characteristic, attribute or domain specific to the assessment of health status, and the attribute can form components of a health measure (Culyer, 2005). Dimensions can be selected for a particular research direction in the study. Stoia and Domnariu (2014), in their article on the dimensions of health and their influence on the work environment, based on the definition provided by the WHO, present a scheme of the dimensions of health, which includes the social, physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual domains.

These have been aligned with the analysis of the work environment. Van Leeuwen and colleagues (2018) display a schema that capture the physical, mental and social dimensions in relation to HRQoL (health-related quality of life). It can be seen in Murdoch-Flowers *et al.* (2017) study of Type 2 Diabetes that the dimensions used resulted from the processes they applied to improve the health status of the chosen community. These are the mental, physical, social and spiritual dimensions.

The three dimensions resulting from the WHO definition have gained popularity in health research, but there are other valuable sets of dimensions to consider. A well-known survey is the SF-36. It considers two dimensions-physical and mental (Ware *et al.*, 1993), with eight health domains: physical functioning (10 items); physical role limitations (four items); bodily pain (two items); general health perceptions (five items); energy/vitality (four items); social functioning (two items); emotional role limitations (three items) and mental health (five items) (Burholt and Nash, 2011). The European Health Interview Survey (EHIS) has a different design and consists of the following modules: health status, health care, health determinants, and core social variables (European Union, 2020). Within this framework, domains such as physical and sensory functional limitations, social support, environmental exposures, mental health etc. can be inferred. The National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) includes several sections from which many domains can be deduced, such as physical, mental, social, economic, emotional functioning (United States Census Bureau, 2023). Being healthy does not only imply a biological normality, but also a spiritual, mental and even social one (Daniliuc, 2016). In accordance with these dimensions, I have created for this paper a running definition that draws multiple points at once: "Health is a complex, multidimensional concept that can be affected by a multitude of factors such as physical, social, mental, religious, intellectual, subjective, environmental, and broadly it links to the idea of pain or suffering in any way, but also the well-being and happiness, i.e. holiness for those who have it.". In perspective, these dimensions are important variables in studies and statistical analyses. Some of these dimensions are reflected in the definitions. Hence, focusing on definitions may be an important step for improving the health statistics.

According to Goldsmith (1972), the inability to define the concept of health leads to obvious problems in measuring health status, a perspective that highlights the importance of a clear definition, as complete as possible, appropriate to the context for which the analysis is being made. As per Madans (2001), the starting point for health surveys is the WHO definition, which highlights the multidimensionality that requires different methodologies. Measuring health status is important because it underpins the decisions of several categories of health representatives. Madans (2001) points out that health survey information is used by public health, elected representatives to inform

health policy and legislation, researchers to better understand population health status, determinants and the health care system. It is therefore important that surveys are well chosen, tested and validated to obtain good results that will inevitably lead to good health policy decisions.

A clear definition of health and a clear differentiation of the concepts of health and health status is a step towards a research direction, such as updating a health measure that incorporates several dimensions observed in the set definition. The health definition mainly affects the dimensions included in research for measuring health status. In this study, the set definition includes the three dimensions from WHO definition and the religious, intellectual, subjective, environmental domains. Besides these, other indicators such as pain, well-being and happiness are pointed. This definition is not limited to a fixed number of dimensions; instead, it gives the flexibility to use other dimensions, which best suits for any research direction.

3. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to create a definition of health that covers as many dimensions as possible. In the first step, a distinction between health and health status was made and the connection between definitions and health dimensions was observed. This study brought to light health dimensions from definitions, studies and surveys to have a better view of health status. The results showed that besides the three key dimensions from WHO definition, there are also dimensions such as functional, subjective, religious, environmental, emotional, and intellectual among others. The idea of happiness, well-being, pain and suffering are also mentioned.

This research has significant implications regarding the impact of the definition on research. These outcomes may improve the research results which may contribute to better health policy decision making. This research has an informative character on the health dimensions, but also has the purpose of releasing a new definition of health to help further research. Future research should investigate more the way that health dimensions are selected studies. All in all, this study emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive definition to address multiple dimensions of health status.

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