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They say an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and if there is anything our current health-care system needs right now, it is to save a pound of cure. As it turns out, there is a contingent of health professionals who know a bit about prevention: health promoters.

In Ontario, many health promoters work behind the scenes in public health units. These professionals broker relationships with local individuals and groups who are vested in health or the factors that influence health. They work collaboratively with partners to plan and deliver programs that promote health and prevent disease, using a combination of different strategies to anticipate, plan and respond to complex issues.

“Most of the things that impact our health are outside of the health care system and are not the responsibility of any one agency” says Susan Stewart, Director of the Community Health and Well-Being Portfolio at KFL&A Public Health. “The thing that health promoters do well is bring a systems way of thinking to local issues, and in that way are able to figure out how to bring about change.”

Stewart, who has worked in health promotion for the past 25 years, relates the work of health promotion to a whole range of issues that affect the public’s health, including the housing shortage, the drug poisoning crisis, poverty, and racism.

“With issues that are complex, partnerships are pivotal to making change” says Stewart.

“All the partners have to be at the table so that you can develop a common understanding of the issue, bring in different perspectives, appreciate the issue in its entirety, look for new actors and agents of change who are committed to the same outcomes, and share resources.”

The challenges that affect health today are outside of the scope of the traditional biomedical model of health, which is to prevent or treat specific disease outcomes in individuals.

“When people think about health, they tend to think about medical sciences and hospitals. But in health promotion, we get to think in more broad and ecological ways, toward a social concept of health.” Stewart explains that health promotion recognizes the root social determinants of health that shape where people live and what experiences and resources they have access to. “With the health challenges facing us today, health promotion is the most promising practice we have to keep people well and preserve our health care system.”

Health promotion works on messy, complicated issues and toward long-term change. In a world that measures and values indicators that are immediate and clinical, the work of prevention is incompatible with conventional models of evidence and success.

“The problem with doing prevention work is that it doesn’t always capture the imagination” relates Stewart. “But the ideas of health promotion are strong, they have carried through and remain relevant in a changing world that increasingly demands complex solutions to complex problems.”

Stewart also serves as the Chair of the Health Promotion Ontario, a professional organization that represents health promoters in Ontario. Each year, Health Promotion Ontario puts on a webinar series that brings together the membership to share ideas, innovations, and celebrate successes across the province. These webinar series are open to everyone. This year, the three-part series is titled, *Health Promotion in a New Era: The Skills We Need for a Changing World*, and will cover three core skills including Advocacy, Inter-Sectoral Partnerships, and Knowledge-Translation and Story-telling.

“Health promoters are one of the few groups in the health field who fully live in the prevention world” notes Stewart. “It will serve us well to make room in our budgets to train, support and employ people who are adept at keeping their eye on the horizon while bridging relationships and balancing moving parts the way that health promoters do.”