

Hi, my name is Mighty Fine. I'm an expert with the American Public Health Association, and today we're going to talk about access to health care.

In 1947, Japan was in rough shape. After the end of World War 2, millions of Japanese people had died and the economy was in shambles. Japan was still dealing with the consequences of the U.S. dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the health of Japan as a whole was suffering.

The average life expectancy for men in Japan was just 50 years, compared to 64 years for men in the U.S.

And yet by 1980, Japan emerged as the nation with the world's longest life expectancy -- thanks to its investment in public health.

First, the government started offering free screenings and treatment for tuberculosis, one of the leading causes of death in Japan for many years.

Then it introduced universal health care coverage, giving everyone insurance for medical services — regardless of their income or employment.

These programs made it easier for people to find a health care provider and afford these services, so they were more likely to get preventative and early medical treatment.

In short, it improved their access to care. Which means being able to find qualified health care providers and receive timely medical services, so people are better able to live their healthiest lives.

And access to care is worth investing in in the U.S. too. Take the impact of the Affordable Care Act in Arkansas and Kentucky. Research from 2015 showed that people having more health care coverage led to more consistent screenings for diabetes. Which meant earlier detection of illness and more timely treatment.

But it's not just about treating disease. Having affordable, quality medical care means people can do things like monitor and manage their blood pressure and cholesterol, which can reduce the risk of developing diseases like diabetes in the first place.

So access to care saves lives, but it also saves money. When people can't afford to monitor their health, they're more likely to become seriously ill and need expensive treatment.

For instance in 2012, hospital stays for heart attacks (which are a side effect of diabetes) cost over \$21,000 each. Diabetes screenings, on the other hand, cost as little as \$25.

But access to care doesn't just help individuals — it improves the health of the community at large. And if you've watched our other episodes, you know that makes access to care an important part of public health.

Take children's vaccinations, which help eradicate infectious diseases and prevent outbreaks. In 2019, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control recorded over twelve hundred cases of the measles. But better access to care would've made it easier to share vaccine information and get kids on a timely vaccination schedule — protecting them and the kids around them.

In the U.S., universal health care coverage could encourage more preventative measures like these. And that's important, because some groups of people are more likely to be uninsured than others and that has an impact on our health outcomes.

In fact, a 2019 study found that Asian American men are nearly twice as likely as white men to suffer from liver and stomach cancer. And the combination of lower than average insurance rates, language barriers and a lack of access to vaccinations could be to blame.

That means access to care is a key part of achieving health equity, the ultimate public health goal — where everyone is ensured the opportunity to live their healthiest life, no matter where they work or how much money they make.

But how we get everyone access to care is a big question.

Some people have proposed systems where patients pay what they can. Others suggest increasing the number of physicians by supporting more residency programs, loan forgiveness and immigration pathways for health care providers.

No matter how we approach it, access to quality health care is at the heart of public health.

It's key to preventing disease, reducing financial strain on the health care system and ensuring that there's equity in health outcomes for all people.

Thanks for watching! This video is part of a series created by Complexly and the American Public Health Association to shed a little light on the important work that public health does. To learn more, visit apha.org.

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