Public Health – Mapping the Structure, Filling the Gaps

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Public health is the Cinderella of Health Law. Major text books, with their focus on the doctor-patient relationship, scarcely give it the time of day, yet it is the starting point for any public welfare system. What explains its weakness and how can we describe public health in a way that gives it the identity and prominence it deserves? If (to misquote Virchow) public health is simply politics writ large, we need a framework of understanding which illuminates its components and articulates its proper role. This discussion seeks to create a coherent picture which distinguishes between (a) the local, national, regional and international agencies responsible for public health, on the one hand, and (b) the medical, commercial and social determinants of health - and disease - on the other. This helps us visualise the areas where intervention has been successful and others which lack focus and deserve more attention. If stakeholders can share some of the same language, public health specialists may be encouraged to focus on common issues and, perhaps, have greater success persuading policy-makers of the need to do more.