INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that the majority of a person’s overall health is driven by social, economic and environmental factors and the behavior influenced by them. These factors are known as social determinants of health. As a health care provider, the impact you can make on health and well-being can be magnified if you look at the whole person in the context of where they were born and where they live, play, work and age. You will need to look beyond the standard social history Q&A and uncover any underlying socio-economic factors that may influence health outcomes.

THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention classifies social determinants of health into 5 categories:

- **Economic Stability**: Strong links between poverty and health have been observed for centuries. The unemployment rate has an impact on rates of domestic violence, substance abuse, depression and physical illness. **Key issues**: poverty, employment, food security and housing stability

- **Social & Community**: Social cohesion (social support from family, friends and community) is associated with lower mortality rates. **Key issues**: cohesion within a community, civic participation, discrimination, conditions in the workplace and incarceration

- **Education**: Recognize the patient’s level of education so the recommendations and treatment plans can be presented in an easy-to-understand manner. **Key issues**: graduating from high school, enrollment in higher education, language and literacy, and early childhood education and development

- **Health Care**: Patients with low health literacy may have trouble understanding prescription labels and navigating complex health forms and systems. This can result in poorer health outcomes and higher costs. **Key issues**: access to health care, access to primary care, health insurance coverage and health literacy

- **Built Environment**: Inadequate housing, dangerous streets and blighted neighborhoods all have a negative impact on health. **Key issues**: quality of housing, access to transportation, availability of healthy foods, quality of the water or air, access to green space and neighborhood crime and violence

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH
Health Systems Science Learning Series

[AMA logo]
SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH AND HEALTH DISPARITIES

Health disparities are differences in health outcomes and their causes among groups of people. Reducing health disparities creates better health for all Americans. Our goal is health equity — when everyone has the opportunity to be as healthy as possible.

Demographic & Racial Health Inequalities
Health inequalities can be tracked over a variety of demographic lines, such as wealth, income, gender and race.

Cultural Racism
Health disparities adversely affect groups of people who have systematically experienced greater obstacles to health care due to characteristics historically linked to discrimination or exclusion.

Social Health Disparities
The social gradient of health stands for the proposition that health and wealth are typically correlated in a linear, stepwise fashion at all levels of income and class.

Geographic Disparities
Disparities exist based on U.S. zip codes. Every person, no matter where they live, should have an equal opportunity to live the healthiest life possible.

It is imperative that physicians ask all patients if they are impacted by social determinants of health, not just those who are part of a vulnerable or disadvantaged group.

IMPROVING YOUR MEDICAL PRACTICE

Consider having resource guides and referral information available for patients (legal assistance, nutritionists, child care services, food pantries, shelters and translators). Look for ways to improve how your medical practice can better serve the community. This might include any of the following:

- Employ a multidisciplinary staff to provide comprehensive care
- Provide training to staff and care team to address implicit bias
- Ensure that the facility is inclusive and respectful to a diverse population (refugees, low-income, LGBTQ, disabled, ESL)
- Hold flexible office hours outside of 9 to 5
- Provide access to health and social resources in the community
- Develop health-promotion strategies to influence strong living and working conditions
- Provide on-site medical-legal assistance
- Provide in-home care for those who cannot travel to the facility
- Design waiting rooms to enhance collaboration between the staff and patients

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- Do you strive to keep an open attitude, respect differences, and be aware of your own implicit biases?
- How could your medical practice improve how it provides culturally appropriate care that reflects understanding of the social determinants that impact health?
- How might you uncover and address social determinants of health and improve outcomes for your patient?