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The Community-Centered Academic Health Department: Implications for Assessment

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The concept of an Academic Health department, the public health version of a teaching hospital, requires collaboration between academic institutions and public health departments. A community-centered model of an academic health department builds on the strengths of a partnership between a local public health department and academic institutions with a primary focus on addressing local public health priorities. This focus on local priorities has important implications for enhancing local capacity to perform the core public health function of assessment and the essential public health services that are particularly related to assessment. The lack of local assessment capacity has led to a number of problems including the community serving as research subject, rather than the community conducting research; failure to translate research into practice; and fragmented disease-specific (categorical) approaches, rather than coordinated system approaches to funding. A community centered academic health department overcomes many of these problems by enhancing the local assessment function through the following five activities: comprehensive assessment, community-based participatory research (CBPR), integration of research and practice, increased use of advanced and alternative research approaches, and integration of assessment services. This presentation focuses on the principles and examples of these activities. This agency initiated academic health department creates increased social and political capital, gained through enhanced capacity and visibility in the community related to the core public health functions and essential services, and provides greater leverage for the public's interest to be represented in major private sector initiatives.