It is no mistake that the philosophy of Epicurus and his students still serves to inspire people 23 centuries after his death. He practiced and taught a practical philosophy and believed that this kind was the only beneficial philosophy. Though we do not have many works left from Epicurus himself, we are able to—using students and critics—establish a strong baseline for what he believed and taught and from there apply it to our lives today. He admonished that the purpose of philosophy was to attain a happy and tranquil life or ‘ataraxia’. In the public health realm, we need a new approach to create lasting change for people at the lowest levels of poverty and wellness. I believe that Epicurus may have given us valuable insight on how to start making our way there.

It is here where we must take a moment to explore what qualifies as the ‘lowest level’ and why we need to measure it differently. In the USA, the official national measure for poverty is the percentage of pre-taxed income below the necessary for the minimum food diet. The concept of measuring happiness as a measure of wellness is not new; in fact, it has been done by more than one president in our own country (Jefferson and Kennedy to name a few). In a speech, Kennedy gave to the University of Kansas in 1958, ‘...gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials’. What he means by this is we spend all our money and time focusing on what we as a country produce and not what makes life worth living. I believe this can be illustrated well by looking at the millions of dollars we as a country spend on public health surveys asking the same questions over and over, because they have proven ‘effective’.

Can we really ask people to spend their entire lives in jobs so detached from an end product that they would not know whether the pin they are making goes to a vacuum or a machine gun and then expect them to be happy and continue to work with vigor? People who work these jobs may be above the pre-taxed income requirements for the minimum food diet but fall well below any measure of happiness, and these are the people with whom you and I, as public wellness workers, will be spending most of our time.

It is apparent that many public health endeavors employ a pseudo version of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs when considering programs to employ. While this approach makes logical sense upon first viewing, there are critical pieces missing that must be addressed to bring about lasting change when applied to public health and wellness. Public health programs tend to focus on the lowest level of things a human needs to survive and then jump straight up the pyramid to education; however, it is only when we spend time in the middle of the pyramid do we see things like friendship and family. As public health professionals, our job is to prevent disease, promote health and prolong life. To do this, we must not focus merely on survival at its most basic level, but on the overall wellness of a person and/or group of people. While Maslow places friendship and family in the middle, we must move it to the bottom and promote it at the very beginning. As Epicurus said, ‘Before you eat or drink anything, carefully consider with whom you eat or drink rather than what you eat or drink because eating without a friend is the life of the lion or a wolf’. To put this in practical terms, Epicurus taught that who we spend time with is much more important than how we spend that time. This applied to the public wellness realm should remind us to encourage healthy community and increase non-damaging familial bonds.
To Epicurus, the key to contentment and happiness was a lack of discomfort. If we are able to satisfy that discomfort, we will feel pleasure and this was the only true pleasure we should strive for. Epicurus believed that there were only two types of pleasure: kinetic pleasure, which was actively fighting against the discomfort, and static pleasure. Static pleasure needs no more attention than what is necessary to preserve itself. Attempting to increase static pleasure with more active pleasure could lead to discomfort or reward only a little beyond the initial state. For example, a middle-class man who feels provided for and comfortable in his smaller home may only be slightly less happy than a man who resides in a mansion. However, if that same man, who has a comfortable small home, were compared with a man living on the street, the difference would be great. Our goal then as providers should not be to bring the homeless man into a mansion but to provide him with at least the lowest level of static pleasure. Studies have assessed the difference in levels of happiness between those with incomes ranging from 0 to $50,000 and from $50,000 to $500,000. The results obey the law of diminishing returns, so we must evaluate the level in which the most contentment can be reached for the most people.

So how can this contentment be achieved and what will be done after it has been reached? There are five things that will allow a person the greatest chance at achieving that ataractic state that will allow them to grow. The first is safety; though safety plays a role in many of a man’s primary needs, it is still an independent entity that requires specific attention that I will not address during this commentary. The second is sustenance; show me a hungry man and I will show you a man with limitations. Third, the person must have good health or easy access to health care; without it, a man is limited by what his or her body can do. Fourth, shelter; one must have a place to stay that is clean and encouraging. Finally, one must have kinship. All of these things must be sustainable and all of them must be independent of each other. If we feed a person twice a week he or she will spend the other 5 days worrying about where to get food and will most likely spend those 2 days in which he or she is fed planning for those days without. Only when we remove the concern for food can we expect a concern for education and other things necessary for a full life. Remember that every person requires a different level of care to achieve the basic level of static pleasure; however, to determine what level that is will be a whole other issue needing much more discussion and authorship. To accommodate that, it will be necessary to keep the programs that satisfy those needs independent of one another, yet are governed by one body. Take a look at Apple’s iPhone for an example of this. The parts for the iPhone are made from multiple companies and are all assembled into a singular, highly successful product. For this reason, if the Central Processing Unit is beginning to fall behind Apple can either push that company to improve on the product or switch to a different company doing it better without having to affect the other parts of its product. For this reason, we can have a free clinic in the same area as a soup kitchen, but they must remain independent as far as their funding and leadership. If the soup kitchen fails to provide an adequate amount of food to match their funding, a review of their services should be undertaken and changes will be made, yet the free clinic will remain untouched and continue to provide the care it was doing before. The governing body will be able to discern whether or not a group has been doing what they set out to do and ensure no one is able to hide bad service behind the auspices of good will. Even further we, as public health professionals, must establish a way to measure the effectiveness of each organization, because once you throw on the mantle of a good will organization you have a responsibility to those who you serve and those who have entrusted you with money or time to serve those people.

Epicureanism was not the only philosophical mindset in his day, nor would many consider it to be a good mindset to strive for. The Athenians*, for instance, would consider it a wasted life and strive to be better citizens either through law, philosophy and military service. The Athenians would argue that their philosophy for a full life added to a society more than an Epicurean lifestyle. The question from a public health standpoint is this: ‘Should our concern be for creating Athenians or Epicureans?’ I would argue that we should primarily be concerned with creating Epicureans and allow for the person to become an Athenian on his own merit and hard work. This mindset allows for public health professionals and businesses to account for progress and success without having to completely factor in human potential, for which I believe there is no limit or adequate measure. There is a point at which a person is allowed to the opportunity to succeed or fail, but how do we quantify that person’s completed success, and should we even try to?

There are people who have the mindset that if a man does not work, he should not eat. Granted, I think there should be considerations in the form of a time scale for the transformation from a dependent to an independent life, but that should be done at the lowest level and not encompass a sweeping statement that may leave out some people with exceptional circumstances. We can say that you earn your meal by going and digging this ditch for a certain amount of time, but that is self-limiting. Let me say here that there are people who find immense value and do very well in the positions of physical labor; however, those positions are becoming fewer and farther between. We are approaching a period of time in
which physical labor has a limited pay scale and life expectancy and even though they do have value I do not think we can depend on them to solve the problems of mass unemployment. What happens when the ditch has been dug and there are no more unskilled physical labor positions are to be found? I think this can be avoided through education and training, but only if the person is allotted the correct amount of support during the period of his training. They should not have to worry about any of those primary needs during this period and be able to focus sole on becoming Athenian. This does not mean they should be cleaned up after, for they are not children but grown people; however, the emphasis should not be placed on earning a meal or a place to stay based on menial labor, which will not aid the person in the long run beyond the concept of ‘Work to Eat’.

The breaking point between where the Epicurean approach I described is useful and where it becomes restricting is this point of exceeding ataraxia. Epicurus taught that pleasures which when not met did not cause discomfort were unnecessary, and a simplistic lifestyle was the best method to reach continual happiness. In a philosophical sense, I would align with Epicurus, and if striving for happiness was life’s sole purpose, then we would do well to stop there. Why should we worry about changing people to Athenians if it will eventually make them less happy because of it? The truth is that the view of Epicureanism I have presented is fatally flawed and poorly focused in a wholesome life’s sense. As Thomas Jefferson, a professed Epicurean, wrote to William Short, ‘Your love of repose will lead, in its progress, to a suspension of healthy exercise, a relaxation of mind, an indifference to everything around you, and finally to a debility of body, and hebetude of mind, the farthest of all things from the happiness’. In other words by simply providing the services, I have mentioned we will put people at risk of becoming dependent and that is far from sustainable and is a trap a few states have fallen hard into. Epicurus taught that the goal in life was happiness and the key to happiness was virtue. The reason I wrote about creating an Epicurean society in the way I did was because of the complex challenges we face; imagine sitting down a hungry man and trying to teach him virtue or the subtle complexities of Epicurus and his teachings. What we can do however is focus on creating the conditions for happiness to occur and use well-reasoned and effective programs to promote education and sustainability. To further define the sustainability I think we should pursue I will say it is the person who can maintain himself on that line of ataraxia without the assistance of a government-funded group.

These things I have mentioned are mere considerations meant to rock the boat and start conversations. When we are talking about policy driving public health and wellness, we need to think long and hard taking statistics and the opinion of those people who are working in the ‘trenches’ to establish and integrate effective policy changes. I do believe that an Epicurean approach will be a good start to bring everyone to the same baseline at least from an ataraxic point of view. By taking these actions, among others, to advance the Epicurean approach to public wellness, we can start helping people achieve true satisfaction and well-being rather than mere survival.

• To avoid diving into Teleology, which will be neither helpful nor productive in this paper, I will use the term Athenian as a philosophy and not as a nation state. This is far from accurate or fair to Athens; however, it will serve the purpose needed to fulfill the goal of this paper.