Social Determinants of Health

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Policy Action on Social Determinants of Health (October, 2011)

The World Health Organization’s Commission on the Social Determinants of Health has sparked broad interest in tackling persistent and widening health inequalities by addressing the social and economic inequality, precarious employment, poverty, inadequate housing, social exclusion and other fundamental factors that underlie these health inequalities. In October 2011, the WHO is sponsoring a global conference on how to implement the Commission’s recommendations.

Social determinants are complex and fundamental change across many inter-connected sectors will be key. But ultimately, significant and sustained change in the determinants of health will require equally significant shifts in state policy and comprehensive and multi-faceted government programs and investments; and part of this is ensuring that policy solutions are aligned with the structural incentives that drive government policy and action. Two policy briefs set out how this can be done.

Adressing “Wicked” Policy Problems

This article for the federal government’s online journal Horizon’s carries forward the analysis of comprehensive community initiatives to argue that they have great policy potential. It sets out the policy, regulatory, funding and capacity building enablers that can achieve this potential.

Canadian Policy Action (March, 2009)

This earlier policy brief sets out a broad overview of government policy, investments and actions needed to address determinants of health. It emphasizes the importance of cross-government and department policy coordination, adapting policies to local conditions and opportunities, and supporting innovation in addressing health inequalities at a community level.

Comprehensive Community Initiatives (June, 2011)

A pre-condition for advancing health equity is building the broad community and political mobilization needed to force the necessary major policy changes and addressing determinants on the ground at local levels. This research examines the potential of broad community collaborations and cross-sectoral initiatives to address the roots of poverty and inequality.
Evidence-Based Planning Tools: Health Equity Impact Assessment
To drive health equity into action we need to understand the needs of health disadvantaged populations, identify barriers to equitable access to quality care, and build equity into priority setting, resource allocation and performance management. That means we need a repertoire of effective equity-focused planning tools. HEIA is one key tool that analyzes the potential impact of service, program or policy changes on health disparities and/or health disadvantaged populations. It can help to plan new services or initiatives, assess and re-align existing programs, and build awareness of equity within organizations.

Cross-Sectoral Coordination and Action (August, 2011)
Critical to successful comprehensive community initiatives, and a central feature of strategies to address social determinants of health, is cross-sectoral collaboration among different levels of government, service providers, community organizers, business and other key stakeholders. This research paper examines the conditions for effective cross-sectoral action.

Health Promotion Through an Equity Lens (December, 2010)
Health promotion is crucial to keeping people well and preventing illness. A major challenge is that many programs do not take peoples’ unequal conditions and opportunities into account, are consequently not effective for vulnerable and marginalized communities, and can actually make disparities worse if they are taken up disproportionately by the more advantaged. This paper analyzes how equity can be built into health promotion.

The Wellesley Institute is a Toronto-based non-profit and non-partisan research and policy institute. Our focus is on developing research and community-based policy solutions to the problems of urban health and health disparities.