INTRODUCTION

An ideal state of health is one of, “...complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease.” (Declaration of Alma-Ata, 1978). In developed and developing countries, there is a big gap between rich and poor people’s health. This briefing explores what social factors influence health, and some actions that might improve health.

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Many health programmes use medical methods alone to tackle disease. But we need a much more holistic approach for a population to be healthy. Involving communities alongside providing medicine can save millions of lives. Governments are increasingly focused on prevention of ill-health in the first place. For example, 18 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa are affected by river blindness. Community members learned how to detect early signs of infection so people could access treatment early.

Definitions

There has been some success in providing medicine, for example, a reduction in malaria of 15-60% by providing bed nets and insecticides in Sub Saharan Africa. However, a more holistic definition of health includes physical, mental and social well-being which medicine alone, nor the absence of disease, can bring. So reducing malaria, as in the example, doesn’t necessarily reduce mortality because numerous other factors cause ill-health. The social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, live and age. These are too many to list, but examples include the health care system, working conditions, employment, education, nutrition, transport and happiness. These conditions, in turn, are shaped by any number of factors including the distribution of power, money and resources at global, local and national levels (WHO, 2000).

The diagram shows a map of the complex social influences on health. At the centre are the factors which people cannot change.
SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Daily living conditions

- **Early life and education**: There is a strong correlation between literacy and low child mortality. Poor health during pregnancy and early childhood can lead to slow growth. Emotional insecurity during this time can also influence psychological health.
- **Social exclusion**: This correlates with premature death – it can prevent people from participating in education or getting access to services. People in poverty, women and minority groups can be at a high risk of exclusion. Stress caused by exclusions can also cause ill-health.
- **Economic circumstances**: Absolute poverty has health impacts because of lack of access to food, clean water and shelter. With 1 billion people living in urban slums this is a key factor.
- **Work**: Hazardous working conditions, long hours and hard labour make ill-health more likely. Unemployment also negatively impacts health.
- **Healthcare**: 100 million people a year find themselves in poverty because of health costs. Many can’t afford health care or it isn’t available.
- **Inequality**: Relative poverty is also linked to poor health. Inequality comes from deeper social structures.

Working to improve social factors that influence health

The World Health Organisation suggests actions to improve:

- **Early equality**: quality primary and secondary education as well as support for caregivers.
- **Healthy places to live**: affordable and safe housing with access to clean water, prevention of environmental degradation and healthy diets.
- **Fair and decent work**: good jobs with salaries that reflect the cost of living, and labour standards to keep workers safe.
- **Advocacy for social protection**: universal health care, benefits and other social protections
- **Tackling inequality in the distribution of power, money and resources**: progressive taxation, health equity as a marker for government performance, the economic contribution of unpaid work (for example, caring for children) to be accounted for and representation for all groups in society.
Measuring the impact of specific programmes to improve health is tricky. Much of the current data about health is inaccurate—there are pressures to supply positive information and it’s difficult to collect health data in some circumstances, for example, civil war. Also, the complex and interlinked nature of the social determinants of health means that proving a particular intervention caused an improvement is problematic. Some examples of success given in the past have included Kerala in India and Sri Lanka – both have relatively positive health indicators compared to their economic size. This has been attributed to high levels of democratic participation, literacy and free health care.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

The greatest impacts in health improvements seem to have come when there is comprehensive health care alongside other positive social factors.

- What kinds of interventions might create sustainable changes in health?
- Are there times when a simple biomedical intervention can help?

**FURTHER READING AND REFERENCES**


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