

Impacting Health Inequities

How can Public Health work effectively at a Community Level on the Social Determinants of Health?

ALPHa Fall Symposium
Equity from the Start

Sudbury's Experience

Janet Gasparini, Panel Member
Executive Director, Social Planning Council of Sudbury
Chair, Social Planning Network of Ontario

In 1999 when Dr. Penny Sutcliffe arrived in Greater Sudbury as the MOH one of her first community events was to be the guest speaker at the Social Planning Council's annual general meeting. Dr. Sutcliffe spoke about the social determinants of health and the ground work was laid for an enriching partnership that has made the links between public health work and social planning work very clear right from the beginning of her tenure.

In the spring of 2007 the City of Sudbury's Expert Panel on Health Cluster (a panel recruited by the Mayor) requested input from the SDHU on opportunities for economic development in regards to health. The Health Unit responded with a presentation in regards to the "savings" to be found by paying attention to the social determinants of health. Intrigued, the Cluster asked for more input and the SDHU and the SPC put our heads together. A power point presentation was created that was used to help people understand the connections between poverty and health outcomes. That power point was used in several venues with both health care professionals and community partners to create a better understanding of the links between the SDOH and health outcomes (see below)

We have hosted 4 community breakfast meetings providing information on the determinants and outcomes for health (and health care costs) when not addressed. We are currently engaging the Cluster members as well as members of the health care delivery community in a dialogue that now includes the local poverty reduction strategy. We are engaging nurses, doctors and other health care professionals as well as hospital administrators in a dialogue that many of them were previously not engaged in. We are finding ways for health care professionals to join in advocacy efforts and be more fully engaged in practical solutions that come from collaborative practice in the community. An example of our work is the participation of both the SDHU and the SPC in the development of the City's Best Start Network. By working together with partners from education, children services, government and others we have created a network of Best Start Hubs located in 12 different schools and community organizations. These locations were chosen based on socio economic mapping that provided data in regards to the neighbourhoods that were most marginalized and at risk of

inequities. These hubs have become the centre for service delivery with family resource, public health, speech and language, child care and other specialized services being made available. Information, screening and referrals are made available and are proving effective in creating a more level playing field.

The Social Planning Council assisted the Sudbury & District Health Unit to become more familiar with the front line delivery services of several community agencies in the downtown core through an agency tour and conversation. The project helped to strengthen relations between the Health Unit and community partners and when the Health Unit opened their downtown outreach site they were moving in amongst colleagues who knew them and who they were eager to work cooperatively with. People in the downtown core who are marginalized and homeless now have access to better health services because of the SDHU's presence downtown and front line agencies are supported in their work.

The SPC and the SDHU are each in a unique position to address the social determinants of health and have found that by collaborating on our efforts we are more effective. Building connections with community agencies, particularly those who work on the front lines with the most marginalized members of our community will help to bring public health resources to the places that will have a significant impact on those who experience the impact of the inequities more acutely. These partnerships will also lead to a more effective mechanism for advocacy work that is required to change policy. Governments will create and change policy based on significant input from their constituents. They have to believe they are responding to what the majority of voters will support. The recent release of the provincial poverty reduction strategy is an excellent example of this. Cross provincial organizing led to the adoption of a common framework for poverty reduction amongst anti poverty advocates. This framework was presented to several MPP's and it was quite evident in the final poverty reduction strategy produced by the Minister of Children & Youth Services (now the Minister of Health). The community engagement process was very effective in influencing the strategy. While public health does an excellent job of advocating through the use of Board motions for policy change that will lead to improvements in health outcomes it would be interesting to examine the opportunity for greater community engagement and thus more voices behind the advocacy efforts.

Public health expertise should be integrated with community development efforts in order to produce more effective local solutions to health inequities and a stronger voice for the changes that need to be made to government policy.

From the Power Point “The Health Impact of Poverty – Opportunities for Health Sector Action

Jason’s Story

Why is Jason in the hospital?

Because he has a bad infection in his leg.

But why does he have a bad infection in his leg?

Because he has a cut on his leg and that got infected.

But why does he have a cut on his leg?

Because he was playing in the junk yard next to his apartment building and he fell on some sharp jagged steel.

But why was he playing in a junk yard?

Because his neighbourhood is kind of run down. A lot of kids play there and there is no one there to supervise them.

But why does he live in that neighbourhood?

Because his parents can’t afford a nicer place.

But why can’t his parents afford a nicer place?

Because his dad is unemployed and his mom is sick.

But why is his dad unemployed?

Because he doesn’t have much education and he can’t find a job.

But why.....

From Towards a Healthy Future – Second Report on the Health of Canadians 1999

Jason’s story didn’t begin with the health sector but the health sector is now spending valuable resources on the treatment of a preventable illness.

But this issue can’t be solved by the health sector alone. Preventing Jason’s infection might have included investments in affordable housing, recreation opportunities, employment training, etc.

Income is the most reliable predictor of health status. Health status rises with each level of socio-economic status. Poverty reduction is a prescription for improved health.

People living in poverty face unique barriers to accessing health care services.

Poverty costs the health sector money.

“The entire community benefits when its members are housed, fed, clothed, can leave their loved ones in safe and stimulating environments and travel to where they need to go. . . . As direct beneficiaries, the economic, education and training and health sectors as well as all levels of government and the community at large have a role to play in this strategy. Believing that reducing poverty is possible, affording it the same attention and importance as any other issue that affects the whole community and monitoring success are key steps in moving this strategy forward.”

Community Strategy to Reduce Poverty in the CGS
The Social Planning Council of Sudbury

What can we do to reduce the health impact of poverty?

Find out about the social and economic conditions that are impacting the people we serve. Set priorities for care/service that reflects those conditions.

Provide health care services that are accessible to people living in poverty. Consider cost, social exclusion, language, culture, discrimination, literacy, transportation, childcare, etc.

Keep informed about the community resources that are available to help people living in poverty.

Use our voice to raise awareness about the health impact of poverty.