

Equity is the Answer

Questioning whether or not telling people to eat well and move more is an effective strategy for promoting health is as basic as it is fundamental. Doing so requires thinking about what health is and what determines whether someone is healthy or unhealthy. It leads to questions about the individual and society.

Health is undoubtedly influenced by the choices that people make on a daily basis. However, we must also consider the circumstances in which these choices are made and the elements of people's lives that are beyond their control. Social inequalities and environmental conditions significantly impact our health and define the freedom with which we are able to act. Despite this governments regularly frame poor health as a result of bad choices made by irresponsible individuals.

To highlight the devastating impact of inequality and challenge the focus on individual choice we need to see health as a social issue. The importance of doing so has been apparent to me throughout my research career. I have spent a lot of time working in deprived areas and am yet to meet anyone who has been unaware that eating well and being physically active was good for their health. I have however met lots of people who struggle to follow this advice because their capacity to act is severely inhibited by their social circumstances.

The work of Professor Danny Dorling provides irrefutable evidence of health being a social issue and of the detrimental impact that social inequality can have on people's health and wellbeing.

His description of the huge chasm in life expectancy between the affluent Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and the relatively deprived Glasgow City as the 'scandal of our times' encapsulates the

injustice of inequality. It is also a call for change. This change relies upon people seeing and understanding how social inequality leads to such stark disparities in health.

What Will has done by capturing scenes from the two places that form the poles of the scandal Dorling describes is to illustrate the very different environments that inequality creates. This collection of photographs displays how each place offers very different opportunities to their residents and thus the vastly different contexts in which choices are made. These pictures highlight that people in different places, both socially and geographically, are not presented with the same choices and, therefore, expose the limits of explaining differences in health as primarily being the outcome of individual choices. They help us to see the need for change.

Promoting health as an individual responsibility whilst leaving the roots and repercussions of inequality unaddressed creates conditions ripe for victim blaming. It is also a cowardly attempt by governments to deflect attention away from their failures to address the social factors that lead to poor health. Unemployment, housing, inadequate social support and vast inequalities are all factors that if addressed would improve people's health. Addressing these social factors is also likely to help people eat well and move more. Reducing inequalities and offering people support relative to their needs would improve the health of everybody.

These are the principles of health equity and if we want everybody to have the chance to live a long and healthy life equity is the answer.

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