
**STAFF REPORT TO THE PLANNING & PROTECTIVE SERVICES COMMITTEE
MEETING OF WEDNESDAY, JUNE 28, 2006**

SUBJECT: **The Social Determinants of Health Conference**

PURPOSE/ISSUE:

To report on the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) Conference held May 8 and May 9, 2006.

BACKGROUND:

The CRD and the Vancouver Health Authority (VIHA) co-sponsored the SDOH Conference with the support of the Ministry of Health and the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria.

The Conference heard introductions from the Deputy Minister of Health, Chair Lowe and VIHA's CEO Mr. Howard Waldner.

The Conference had two main local presenters including Simon Fraser University's Dr. Michael Hayes and Dr. Richard Stanwick, Vancouver Island's Chief Medical Health Officer. There were also presentations from England and New Zealand experts, small group workshops, and panel discussions all aimed at finding ways to deal with social determinants of health.

Social determinants of health are the features of society such as income and its distribution (gap between rich and poor), education, employment and working conditions, housing and early childhood experiences, etc., which affect health. Collectively they are deemed more important than health services in enabling or creating health.

The social determinants manifest in a social gradient of health. This means that people further down the social ladder usually run at least twice the risk of serious illness and premature death as those near the top and that each step down the social ladder disease and morbidity increases and life expectancy declines. There is also evidence that each step down the social ladder involves an increase in the rate of use health services. Adverse social conditions therefore cost the health system.

Selected key information from the Conference includes:

“Ongoing unchecked growth in the health system will choke off other public expenditures which also support health sustainability requires effectiveness in addressing social determinants.”
- (Deputy Minister of Health)

“In a definitive study of the gradient of health across occupational groups in England (Whitehall Study) between 65% and 86% of the reasons why the highest occupational group had lower mortality rates from cardiovascular heart disease (lived longer) were unexplained. Only 14% – 35% of cardiovascular disease rates amongst occupational groups was explained by the normally associated risk factors of cholesterol, smoking and blood pressure. “It is everyday living and working conditions which have the main influence on health mainly through the effects of stress.” - (Michael Hayes).

Chronic exposure inhibits the immune system and persons exposed to prolonged stress are more vulnerable to illness ranging from infectious disease and cardiovascular conditions. Chronic stress is also linked to a number of risk conditions such as depression, alcohol and substance abuse and smoking.

Dr. Stanwick's Discussion Paper showed that the effects of social determinants are observed on Vancouver Island and/or the province.

- Life expectancy is higher and mortality rates are lower in wealthier areas/communities.
- The prevalence of chronic conditions (under age 65) is higher amongst lower income groups.
- Persons in the lowest income quartile are four times as likely to report poor/fair health as those in the highest quartile (gap in mental health is six times higher).
- Children and youth in the lowest income quintile are twelve times more likely to report poor or fair health compared to those in the highest quintile and VIHA does not compare favorably with the rest of the province for child-risk factors (percent on social assistance, teen pregnancies, children-in-care, juvenile serious crime rate).
- There is a clear gradient in the relationship between income and use of health services (probability of being hospitalized, days of care received and use of physicians).
- The kind of communities we develop is a more important determinant of health than the kind of health system we construct.

ALTERNATIVES:

Not applicable

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

Not applicable

SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS:

From all accounts the Conference was a success. The full Conference report will be available in August. The Conference Working Group believes its aims of increasing knowledge and understanding of social determinants was achieved. The Working Group will continue to push this very important issue forward.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the report be accepted as information.

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COMMENTS: