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The Determinants of Health

The range of social, ecological, political, commercial and cultural factors that influence health status are known as the determinants of health. These are often complex and interrelating factors that contribute to a person's current state of health and their chances of maintaining good health or becoming ill or injured. Circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power, and resources at the international, domestic and local level.

The determinants of health are occasionally referred to as 'the causes of the causes', as we recognise that health is not simply about individual behaviour or exposure to risk, but how social, ecological, economic and cultural structures shape the health of population groups around the world. To a large extent, factors such as where we live, the state of our environment, genetics, income, education and the relationships we have with friends and family all share considerable impacts on health, whereas the more commonly considered factors such as access to health services and frequency of use often have less of an effect.

Social Determinants of Health

The social determinants of health (SDH) are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age and the systems in place that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality of life outcomes and risks. These set of forces and systems shape the conditions of daily life, and are responsible for health inequities – the unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries. Health inequities are not only shaped by unequal distribution of resources, but can include social isolation and the sense of control over life circumstances and choices. People need to feel that they have a certain level of control over their lives, jobs, housing and environment, and other resources that enhance quality of life, as these can have a significant influence on population health outcomes. The World Health Organization (WHO) explains that these social and economic conditions, and their effects on people's lives, determine our risk of illness; the actions we can take to prevent ourselves becoming ill; and our ability to treat illness when it occurs.

In 2003, WHO identified the 10 key social determinants of health:

- The social gradient
- Stress
- Early life
- Social exclusion
- Work
- Unemployment
- Social support
- Addiction

- Food
- Transportation

Ecological Determinants of Health

There are many ecological processes and natural resources that are essential for the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. The view that humans are fundamentally more important than other forms of life ignores the reality that human survival depends on the diversity of other life forms, which are in turn interdependent themselves. The ecological determinants of health can include adequate amounts of fresh and uncontaminated water and oxygen as well as access to nature or green space. Other important determinants are ecological processes and natural resources such as fertile soil to grow food and other plants, materials to construct shelter, a stable climate with temperatures conducive to sustaining life and the ozone layer to protect the Earth from harmful levels of UV radiation. We recognise that home environment, built environment, access to nature and the ecological environment all play a role in maintaining human health and well-being, and we need to take into account how our decisions and actions affect these ecosystems. Climate change will have a major impact on the health and wellbeing of populations into the future, especially those who are marginalised or part of vulnerable groups.

Political Determinants of Health

Many of the determinants of health are dependent on the action of local, national and international laws and legislation. The importance of policy and the orientation of politics in the health outcomes of populations has gained attention as an important factor in mainstream public health. Looking at health via the political determinants means analysing how competing power groups, institutions, processes, interests and ideological positions affect health within different political systems and cultures and at differing levels of governance. Politically progressive governments will generally endorse progressive policies which aim to reduce the impact of social inequalities on health. The political arena can be used to promote and protect a wellfunctioning ecosystem, healthy and sustainable lifestyles through the control of tobacco and alcohol use, improving access and funding to health services or to tackle health inequalities. Political outputs include the laws, taxes, social security benefits, public services, etc. that will ultimately produce the health and other societal outcomes of interest.

Commercial Determinants of Health

In 2013, World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Margaret Chan noted that “efforts to prevent non-communicable diseases go against the business interest of powerful economic operations”. The retailing of tobacco products, alcohol and foods high in sugar, salt and fat is big business, and with the increase of non-communicable diseases comes the manifestation of a global economic system that prioritises wealth creation over generating and nurturing health and sustainability. The commercial determinants are closely linked with the political determinants of health and can be defined as the strategies and approaches used by the private sector to promote products and choices that are detrimental to health. These strategies include marketing practices, which can enhance the attraction and acceptability of unhealthy products and commodities;

lobbying, which can impede political obstacles such as plain packaging and legal drinking ages; corporate social responsibility strategies, which can deflect attention and re-establish reputations; and extensive supply chains which amplify company influence worldwide.

Cultural Determinants of Health

The cultural determinants of health incorporate the cultural factors that promote resilience, foster a sense of identity and support good mental and physical health and wellbeing for individuals, families and communities. Cultural determinants are shaped, supported and protected through traditional cultural practice, kinship, connection to land and Country, art, song and ceremony, dance, healing, spirituality, empowerment, ancestry, belonging and self-determination. These determinants have a strengths based perspective, acknowledging that stronger connections to culture and Country promotes and leads to stronger health and wellbeing and improved outcomes across the other determinants of health. Consistent with the thematic approach to the Articles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, cultural determinants include, but are not limited to:

- Self-determination
- Freedom from discrimination
- Individual and collective rights
- Freedom from assimilation and destruction of culture
- Protection from removal/relocation
- Connection to, custodianship, and utilisation of country and traditional lands
- Reclamation, revitalisation, preservation and promotion of language and cultural practices
- Protection and promotion of Traditional Knowledge and Indigenous Intellectual Property
- Understanding of lore, law and traditional roles and responsibilities.

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