

US Public Engagement Campaign: Unnatural Causes

In the Politics of Health Group we believe the time is right to bring a discussion of the social determinants of health and health inequalities into the public gaze, to promote a national debate on health as a human right and the social changes that would be necessary to respect that.

We have been inspired by a US public engagement campaign, "Unnatural Causes"¹. Central to this campaign is a series of television programmes to be aired on the US Public Broadcasting television networks that aim to highlight the "*mounting evidence of how lack of access to power and resources can get under the skin and disrupt human biology as surely as germs and viruses*"². The series, to be broadcast in March and April 2008, will explore the links between health outcomes and income, health outcomes and race, health outcomes and neighbourhoods, and health outcomes and globalisation.

Building on these television programmes the campaign aims to raise the profile of health inequalities and the social determinants of health in four ways: reaching out to the press to engage with opinion leaders in the media; targeted outreach to engage with elected officials, public health professionals, non-health stakeholders and community health equity initiatives; a web site to act as a hub for campaign participants; educational dissemination to place DVDs of the programmes into schools, colleges, health centres and other centres of learning. There are currently over 200 organisations registered as partners in this process.

We have an advantage in the UK in that health inequalities are already part of the political vocabulary. However, the concept can be understood in many ways and the current focus is dominated by the greater prevalence of unhealthy behaviours in poorer communities. Clearly lifestyle choices are very important to individuals' health. At a population level, however, we need to be more concerned about the socio-economic factors that impact on health outcomes. That means exploring and challenging the dominant view of monetary wealth as a good in itself and the distribution of power and resources that follow from that. Ultimately it is about our social values and what sort of society we want to live in.

A poll conducted by the Fabian Society and YouGov in 2007 found that 85% of the British public support a narrowing of income inequalities³. There is a growing debate about the fairness of the extremes in income that exist in British society. The three main political parties are all talking about how they would make Britain more equal. The stage is set for a debate on the impact of socio-economic conditions on health outcomes and our right to good health. The evidence is clear: more equal societies are healthier societies. We want to engender a public engagement campaign similar to Unnatural Causes in the UK. Join us!

If you wish to work with the Politics of Health Group on this or any other public health issues please contact Debbie at contact@pohg.org.uk

This article first appeared in *healthmatters*, Issue 71, Spring 2008

¹ <http://www.unnaturalcauses.org>

² http://www.pbs.org/unnaturalcauses/about_the_series.htm

³ <http://fabians.org.uk/publications/extracts/rachael-jolley>