
News Release

Non-medical Determinants of Health Often Neglected – Historical Study

Ottawa, October 19, 2000 – The current focus on reform of Canada’s health care system is once again stealing the stage from equally important non-medical determinants of the health of Canadians.

A new discussion paper released today by CPRN puts today’s debate in historical context. Seen in that light, it is one more chapter in a 25-year struggle between the demands of the health care system and investments in “population health,” the non-medical determinants of health. These are investments designed to prevent the onset of illness. They include such things as anti-poverty measures, supports to healthy child development, a clean environment, economic and social equality, housing, education and decent jobs in safe workplaces.

“Health beyond Health Care: Twenty-five Years of Federal Health Policy Development,” by consultant Barbara Legowski, and CPRN researcher Lindsey McKay, is an analysis of the history of non-medical health policy development within the federal government.

A part of the **Towards a New Perspective on Health Policy** project of CPRN’s Health Network, this study is essential background reading for anyone interested in how Canada’s health policy has developed.

From the time of the Lalonde Report in 1974, which argued that healthier lifestyles, better nutrition and a healthier physical environment play a greater role in health than the advancement of medicine, federal health experts have tried to turn that understanding into policies and programs.

There have been successes, with health promotion programs in the 1970s and 1980s aimed at drinking and driving, seat belt use, or smoking. And, more recently, a major impetus for the growing public investment in national early childhood programs is their beneficial impact on health.

But a perennial emphasis on health care has detracted from policies designed to prevent poor health to begin with. So, more than 25 years after Lalonde, there is still plenty of room for investment in health, in addition to health care.

The current paper identifies the conditions that foster policy innovations within the public sector, the barriers to implementation of population health insights and the challenges ahead.

“It is perhaps natural that the health care system gets the lion’s share of attention,” says Sholom Glouberman, Director of CPRN’s Health Network. “That’s where most of us encounter health issues in a direct way. But if we could raise public awareness of the tremendous health benefits of investment in our social and physical environments, we might have a more fruitful debate over where our next health dollar should go.”

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CPRN is a national not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to create knowledge and lead public debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians, in order to help build a more just, prosperous and caring society.

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Copies of “**Health beyond Health Care: Twenty-five Years of Federal Health Policy Development**,” are available on request at 613-567-7500.