New Way to Look at Health Means Better Results – Researchers

September 6, 2000 – Who would have thought Aristotle had anything useful to say about health in the 21st century?

Sholom Glouberman for one. And the Director of CPRN's Health Network explains why in the first of three papers included in "Towards a New Concept of Health: Three Discussion Papers" (CPRN Discussion Paper No. H|03), published today.

"Aristotle had a very subtle grasp of how an individual's social standing might contribute to his or her ability to act or take advantage of the opportunities society affords," Glouberman says.

"Naturally, this has ramifications for health. In fact, as we try, here in Canada, to understand why some people are more healthy than others, we find Aristotle's insight as fresh today as it was more than two thousand years ago."

Today, the evidence shows that among the factors that influence health over a person's lifetime, the health care system, itself, is far less significant than the social environment. Measures of health status, like mortality, morbidity and self-assessment, all vary according to socio-economic measures like education, social class, occupation and income.

The three papers in this volume reflect an intellectual itinerary, the record of a search for a fresh understanding of health. Aristotle is the first stop along the way, but the authors go on to examine the development of the concept of health from the time of Hippocrates down to the end of the 20th century. They draw on that journey to propose a new hypothesis for understanding what they call the "health gradient" – the path that shows people's health status closely parallels their socio-economic status, regardless of the quality of the health care system available to them.

"What is challenging here, and hard to assimilate," Glouberman says, "is that this is not merely true of people who are disadvantaged: the very poor or the socially isolated. People with full-time jobs and families, with relatively stable lives in the middle of the socio-economic ladder, are less well than those above them. This disparity in health status is true for conditions such as heart disease and many cancers, and for mortality."

Today's publication is part of a major research effort to develop a new way of looking at health. Towards a New Perspective on Health Policy is a CPRN project designed to help policymakers tackle some of their most difficult challenges. In particular, researchers are focussing on inequalities in health and why they persist in a universally accessible health care system like Canada's.

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The papers in the current volume include:

(1) *Social Inequality – Aristotle's Insight*, by the Director of the Health Network, Sholom Glouberman, which draws on Aristotle's understanding of social class and its link to well-being, to underline the point that socio-economic status can be a determinant of health without being, strictly speaking, a cause.

(2) *The Health Gradient Challenge: A New Approach to Health Inequalities*, by CPRN researchers, Sari Kisilevsky, Philip Groff, and Catherine Nicholson, which follows the historical development of the concept of health from ancient times to the present. The paper moves from the notion of health as simply a function of the individual organism, to more modern concepts that recognize the role of the physical and social environments. Finally, it proposes an additional link – that between people's health and the quality of their *interaction* with their social context.

(3) *A Dynamic Concept of Health*, by Sholom Glouberman, which synthesizes the results of the two earlier research efforts and places them in the context of other developments in contemporary intellectual history.

"What you see here is not the end of our work," says Glouberman, "but just another step along the way. We are engaged in an iterative process of discussion and revision with other researchers and policymakers. That will continue. We hope the results will make a significant contribution to developing a new platform for health policy in Canada."

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