The role of public health in the health of Canada’s children

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Although Canadians are among the healthiest people in the world, some groups of Canadians are more likely to experience poorer health and premature death than others. In general, health status follows a step-wise gradient where people in less advantageous socio-economic circumstances are not as healthy as those at each subsequently higher socio-economic level. Those with the lowest incomes and education, in combination with other related factors – inadequate housing, poor working conditions, detrimental health behaviours, limited access to health care, and who lack early childhood support and/or social supports – are more likely to develop poorer physical and mental health outcomes than those living in better circumstances.

Canada has strong social policy foundations that have helped to make it more egalitarian, and thereby, healthier. Programs like the Canada and Quebec Pension Plans, Old Age Security, Employment Insurance, publicly funded health care and universal primary and secondary education have all helped to establish a minimum standard of living. However, after 20 years of declines, income inequality has increased in Canada over the last decade.

Two papers in the current issue of Chronic Diseases in Canada highlight the importance of social and economic factors as determinants of children’s health. The paper by Gagné and Hamel reported that children in the most materially deprived areas of Quebec had significantly higher risks of hospitalization by income. Understanding the causes of these inequalities and developing interventions that reach these groups are essential elements of public health action. It is not enough to focus solely on individual health choices and behaviours, as peoples’ actions are very much shaped by the social and environmental conditions in which they live and work. A balanced mix of targeted interventions for high risk populations and universal programs for all is more likely to work in a country as vast and complex as Canada. This kind of balance ensures that, regardless of personal circumstances, Canadians experience those conditions necessary for better health and for making healthy choices the easier choices.

References

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