

Source: Third Force News

NHS can't fix the health gap between rich and poor



Call for more investment in voluntary and community health initiatives to counter Scotland's health inequality 7th January 2015 by Susan Smith.

Scotland should invest more in voluntary sector health bodies in order to tackle the huge difference in the health of Scotland's richest and poorest people.

Voluntary health bodies have said the sector can help tackle the problem, which a group of MSPs this week highlighted as an ongoing blight on Scottish society.

A report from the Scottish Parliament's health and sport committee highlighted the shocking fact that a boy born today in Lenzie, East Dunbartonshire, can expect to live until he is 82 while another born only eight miles away in Calton, in the east end of Glasgow, will live on average 28 years less, until he is just 54 years old. The report follows a two-year inquiry, from which the MSPs have concluded that the NHS alone cannot solve the problem of health inequality.

They found that despite an increase in funding to tackle this problem since devolution, it is a long way from being solved. Public health campaigns could actually be responsible for increasing health inequalities, said the report, as the messages are more likely to be picked up by middle class people.

That your income, your education and where you live contribute to how healthy you are is an issue that as a society should bring us significant shame.

Claire Stevens, chief officer of Voluntary Health Scotland, which is currently investigating the role of the voluntary sector in tackling health inequalities, told TFN that health inequalities are about people being unable to access services and being sick more often and longer.

She said: “Voluntary organisations are closest to the issues and know how to make the biggest difference to the lives of people in Scotland’s poorest communities.

“Support for self-management of long term conditions, community food initiatives, local arts projects, tenancy support and credit unions, for example, all help to support better health.

“Voluntary Health Scotland welcomes this report from the Scottish Parliament’s health and sport committee as it highlights the need for a new approach to tackling health inequality.

“We believe that approach should involve more effective collaboration between the sectors, investment in voluntary sector initiatives that are proven to make a real difference and crucially an understanding of the lived experience of health inequalities.”

The committee report calls for a wide range of approaches to tackling health inequalities across a number of fronts.

It found that most of the primary causes of health inequalities lie outside the health field – being income and deprivation related.

Ian Welsh, chief executive of the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland, also urged further investment in third-sector and community health services.

He said that the powers that be need to work directly with people who have health problems, listen to what they need and support services that enable them to take control over their own lives and health.

“The third sector has massive reach across health, social care, housing, regeneration, leisure, physical activity and social enterprise and it's mobilisation of the national volunteer effort around empowering and enabling individuals make it the change agent of choice,” said Welsh. “Transfer the resource, see the difference it will make”

The committee suggested exploring solutions using taxation and the benefits system to help reduce income inequalities.

It said other policy measures within the Scottish Parliament's devolved powers, for example in education and housing, could also have an impact.

Convener of the health and sport committee Duncan McNeil MSP said: “That your income, your education and where you live contribute to how healthy you are is an issue that as a society should bring us significant shame.

“Since devolution, successive governments have made this a political priority and invested significant amounts of public money in tackling this complex issue. But sadly none have made any significant difference.

“Often the solution will not be in the health service. Our NHS can offer a sticking plaster, but without a new approach, we will not tackle the root causes of inequality and improve the health outcomes of thousands of people across Scotland.”

A Scottish Government spokesman said: "In the face of the UK government's welfare cuts, we are using all the powers at our disposal, and working with all of our partners to tackle poverty and inequality and help people into work.

“Measures announced in the Programme for Government, coupled with decisive and targeted action to address alcohol consumption, reduce smoking rates, encourage active living, healthy eating and promoting positive mental health, all play their part in tackling health inequalities and delivering a more just society.”