What is health equity? What are health disparities? And why do the definitions matter?

The Colorado Trust, Denver, January 31, 2013

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“The poor are getting poorer, but with the rich getting richer it all averages out in the long run.”

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What are “health disparities/inequalities”?

- Differences, variations: descriptive terms
- Most official U.S. definitions refer only to differences between unspecified groups
- But we really mean: Health differences that are unfair (in a particular way)
- M. Whitehead: unfair, avoidable, and unjust
- But ideas of fairness, avoidability, and justice vary
Are all health differences unfair?

- Skiers have more arm/leg fractures than non-skiers
- Women live longer than men
- Wealthy people in Manhattan have a health problem that wealthy people in Hollywood, CA do not
- Younger adults are generally healthier than elderly
- White women are more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer

Who determines what’s fair?
Who determines what’s avoidable?
What if the causes are not known?

- African-American newborns are 2 or more times as likely as White newborns to be:
  - born too small (low birth weight)
  - born too early (premature)
  - And these predict infant mortality, childhood disability, and adult chronic disease

- The causes are not known
- Can we call this unfair?
Human rights principles provide guidance

- Social & economic rights, including the right to achieve the highest attainable standard of health
- Rights to: education, living standard adequate for health, benefits of progress, participation in society
- Governments should progressively remove obstacles to fulfillment of rights of all, especially for those with more obstacles
- Non-discrimination & equality: prohibits actions with intent or effect of discrimination; requires affirmative action
Which groups?

- NIH has a new institute on minority health and health disparities (NIMHD).
- Should NIMHD prioritize health of:
  - Veterans?
  - People with autism?
  - People with rare but catastrophic diseases?
  - Affluent communities that demonstrate higher rates of certain health problems?
  - White women’s high incidence of breast cancer?
  - Men’s shorter life expectancy?
  - LGBT groups?
Human rights principles: Non-discrimination and equality

- Vulnerable groups: race or ethnic group, skin color, religion, language, or nationality; socio-economic status; gender, sexual orientation or gender identity; age; disability; geography; political affiliation

- Implicit: vulnerability due to history of discrimination, social exclusion or marginalization
  - Examples: slavery, genocide, hate crimes, expropriation of ancestral lands, targeted marketing of harmful goods, negative media depictions, slurs
A human rights-based definition of health disparity & health equity

- A health difference closely linked with social or economic disadvantage
- Health disparities adversely affect groups who have systematically experienced greater social or economic obstacles to health based on characteristics of their group historically linked to discrimination or exclusion
- Health equity: pursuing the highest possible standard of health for all while focusing on those with the greatest social or economic obstacles to health
A human rights-based definition of health disparity & health equity

- Equity versus equality
  - Equal rights for all. Does not mean equal resources

- Obligation to focus on those with the greatest obstacles to fulfilling their rights.

- Obligation to address not only medical care but also the social determinants that shape opportunities to be healthy
Not all health differences are *health disparities*

- Not all health differences -- or even all health differences warranting attention
- A particular subset of health differences that reflect social injustice
- Plausibly avoidable, systematic health differences adversely affecting a socially disadvantaged group
- May reflect social disadvantage -- but in any case put already disadvantaged groups at further disadvantage with respect to their health
Concepts and measurement of health disparities and health equity: not just a technical issue

- Based on values
  - Equity is the ethical principle underlying a commitment to reduce disparities
  - Health disparities are the metric by which health equity is assessed
- Implications for policy and resource allocation in multiple sectors, including medical care
- Pursuing equity requires swimming upstream, against prevailing tides – will encounter resistance
- Need to know where we are headed and why
Finding solutions to health disparities: Understanding the importance of social factors

- Policies to promote economic development, reduce poverty, and reduce racial segregation
- Policies to promote child and youth development and education, infancy through college
- Policies to promote healthier homes, neighborhoods, schools and workplaces

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission to Build a Healthier America  www.commissiononhealth.org
Finding solutions by understanding how health is transmitted across lifetimes and generations