

Commentary on Economic Contexts: Implications for Future Priorities in Disease Prevention Research

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Despite a recent shift toward less government involvement in a wide range of areas, support for improving health and supporting health research is still strong. The challenge is to show how social factors and health are linked and how broad social changes affect health. By demonstrating that improved health of the population can reduce costs for the society, researchers can increase the likelihood that policies aimed at preventing mental illness will be adopted.

Policy and Social Change

These chapters on socioeconomic disparities in mental health and mental disorders elucidate the repeated findings in the literature of persistent differences among social classes in a wide variety of health areas, with lower socioeconomic status (SES) most consistently being associated with poorer health outcomes. Even when a disease is less prevalent among lower SES individuals, the rates of *mortality* associated with the disease are higher among those in lower socioeconomic statuses.

Some papers suggest that the health differences associated with SES cannot be substantially ameliorated without major social change. Clearly, if a social change model is a prerequisite for improved health outcomes, then the interventions must affect factors at the fundamental cause level - i.e. the social and economic resources available to individuals and to the communities in which they live. Decisions are made daily on policies regarding such resources. Changes in the tax code and in policies or laws regarding welfare, family leave, child care, employment and the environment can have profound impacts on health; seldom, however, is the link established and highlighted between such policies and health outcomes. It is critical for both policy makers and researchers to understand that broad social change can affect a number of diseases and conditions. Such breadth of impact cannot be obtained with interventions limited to a particular disease or a particular mechanism. Several papers take a step toward proposing such broad-based approaches. The case for major social change as a preventive health strategy could be substantially strengthened by further research on the economic impact of disease and the economic benefit of disease prevention.

Cost Effectiveness Research

In addition to assessing the multiple health benefits of a broad social intervention, it is critical to examine the cost-effectiveness of different intervention strategies compared with each other and compared with no intervention. Intervention costs have become increasingly important as budgets have tightened in the federal, state and local agencies primarily responsible for supporting services. In the area of physical health, primary prevention strategies have generated dramatic cost savings. For example, interventions aimed at preventing osteoporosis ultimately prevent hip fractures and, frequently, subsequent nursing home care; the savings are substantial.

As mental health administrators confront fiscal pressures, the advantages of well-grounded primary prevention and treatment should be strongly apparent-- for behavioral and social as well as pharmacological interventions. The papers in this volume touch on issues involving both direct and indirect health care costs. However, this body of prevention research and the policies that derive from it could benefit by further research on the cost effectiveness of mental health interventions that prevent adverse health outcomes related to events such as violence, family dissolution, and alcohol-related automobile accidents. A broadly defined range of consequences of mental illness will underscore the impact of prevention activities.

The evaluation of interventions traditionally shows an improvement in quality of life, but it is no longer sufficient to assert that an intervention reduces stress or facilitates coping. Interventions are considered for broad implementation when they produce the desired outcome, but they have even greater value if the benefit to society, particularly in reduced costs, can be demonstrated. Clearly, not all interventions will result in cost savings. In many cases, the cost is well justified by improvements in health and quality of life alone. However, a strong research base that associates major cost savings with prevention would be extremely persuasive for policy makers.