

Our Zip Code May Be More Important Than Our Genetic Code: Social Determinants of Health, Law and Policy

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Public health is defined as “what we, as a society, do collectively to assure the condition for people to be healthy.” (Institute of Medicine (IOM), 1988, 2003). This evokes the social determinants of health – where we live, learn, work and play has a greater impact on individual and population health than does access to health care. However, when we discuss health and health disparities, clinical care problems are often framed as the problems with the health-care system. Recently, the Institute of Medicine has moved to make the distinction that in public health, the clinical care system is but one part of the overall health system, which should help to avoid the conflation of health as only a product of medical care (IOM 2010).

In June 2011, Rhode Island Gov. Lincoln Chafee signed a law (RIGL 23-64.1), creating the Commission for Health Advocacy and Equity. The Commission’s mandates are to advise the Department of Health about racial, ethnic, cultural, or socioeconomic health disparities; to advocate for the integration of the activities that will help achieve health equity; to help develop a health equity plan that addresses social determinants of health, not just in the Health Department, but across state government; to align statewide planning activities in developing health equity goals and plans, and to educate other state agencies and organizations on health disparities.

Brown University’s Taubman Center for Public Policy sponsored a seminar series open to the community addressing Social Determinants, Law and Policy. The three-seminar series explored what the social determinants of health are and how we all and policymakers can address health

inequities through law and policy.¹ The first seminar, “Understanding the Social Determinants of Health,” explored the concepts of social determinants and how they can be measured. The second, “Law and Social Determinants: Legal Interventions to Address Health Disparities,” focused on legal tools to promote health equity and healthy communities. The third seminar, “Health in All Policies: Designing Cross-Sector Policies to Improve Health,” considered statutory legislation and institutional policy, local and national, which can increase health equity and promote healthy communities.

This special issue contains a series of papers expanding key themes addressed in the seminars. Making real improvements in the health of our communities, especially the economically, socially and environmentally impoverished communities, requires much more than “fixing” our wasteful, fragmented and misdirected medical-care systems. If we are to achieve health equity, it is time for us to evaluate how to truly shift the dialogue, and not inadvertently replicate the same disparities we are trying to eliminate. We must examine how disparities impact us all across demographics and not only the most vulnerable, though they bear the greater burden. It is our intent with this edition to provide tools to better equip us to evaluate the social determinants of health and ways to take action through law and policy.

Acknowledgements

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Reference

1. For access to the videos from the seminars, see the Taubman Center for Public Policy Archives
<http://www.brown.edu/academics/taubman-center/events/social-determinants-health-law-and-public-policy>
<http://www.brown.edu/academics/taubman-center/events/social-determinants-health-law-and-public-policy-part-2>
<http://www.brown.edu/academics/taubman-center/events/social-determinants-health-law-and-public-policy-part-3>