

Time for New Zealand to step up on health inequities

25 October 2011

It's time for New Zealand to become a leader in reducing health inequities, according to health organisations, but we must start with the here and now.

Ten health sector leaders are calling on the government to endorse the political declaration of a World Health Organization (WHO) Conferenceⁱ which concluded on 21 October 2011 in Rio de Janeiro. The conference called on WHO member states to take action worldwide on social determinants of health which include children's early years, education, economic status, employment conditions, housing and effective health care systems.

Spokesperson for the group, Public Health Association National Executive Officer Dr Gay Keating, says New Zealand needs to play a leading role in this vital global effort, but it must first address the inequities existing within its own borders.

"Most children here can expect to live a long time, but our poor children die at a faster rate than every other OECD country except Mexico and Turkey. This is no wonder when more than 230,000 of our children and teens live in deprivation,ⁱⁱ struggling daily with ill health, damp and crowded living conditions and financial insecurity.

"New Zealand is no longer a great place in which to raise your children. We're now only world leaders in unintended teen pregnancy and death from injuries and child abuse."

The group says the declaration is very clear governments must make a quality health system that is accessible by everyone a high priority.ⁱⁱⁱ Special attention must also be given to early childhood development in public policies and social health services.^{iv}

"A good start would be a visible cross-party agreement on a strategy for improving the environment in which children live," Dr Keating says.

The declaration says countries must act on social determinants of health, not just because they are a moral and human rights imperative, but also because they are "indispensable to promote human wellbeing, peace, prosperity and sustainable development."^v

Dr Keating says health inequities in New Zealand have steadily worsened over the last few decades and this is having a profound impact on our wellbeing, prosperity and development as a nation.

"We will all pay dearly for leaving so many children in unhealthy conditions and with such bleak economic futures. The poor are paying right now. The rest of us will pay later when so many, who could be supporting us in our old age, are themselves unwell and in need of assistance from the state."

Dr Gay Keating
National Executive Officer
Public Health Association
0273 414 708

Prof Norman Sharpe
Medical Director
The Heart Foundation
Contact: Nicole Bremner, Senior
Communications Advisor 021672594

Dennis McKinlay
Executive Director
UNICEF NZ (UN Children's Fund)
04 815 9380 or 021 396 966

Dr Jill Clendon
Nursing Policy Adviser and Researcher
New Zealand Nurses Organisation
027 412 9164

Assoc Prof Cindy Kiro
Head of School of Public Health
Massey University Wellington
021 472 658

Dr Jan Pearson
Chairperson
Agencies for Nutrition Action
027 4517359

Heather Henare
Chief Executive
Women's Refuge
027 449 0885

Trevor Simpson
Senior Health Promotion Strategist
Health Promotion Forum of New Zealand
Runanga Whakapiki ake i te Hauora o Aotearoa
027 829 6099

Martin Street
Senior Communications Officer
Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand
021 790 236

Deborah Morris-Travers
Advocacy Manager
Barnardos NZ
0272 811 575

-
- ⁱ *Rio Political Declaration on Social Determinants of Health*, World Health Organization, Rio De Janeiro, Brazil, 21 October 2011. Available at www.who.int/entity/sdhconference/declaration/Rio_political_declaration.pdf.
- ⁱⁱ www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/monitoring/household-incomes/index.html
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Rio Political Declaration on Social Determinants of Health*, Article 7, page 2.
- ^{iv} *ibid*, Article 11.2 (xi), page 3.
- ^v *ibid*, Article 16.2, page 7.