The Social Determinants of Health

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Presentation to the Secretary's Advisory Committee on Infant Mortality

March 26, 2015

Definition

- The social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels. The social determinants of health are mostly responsible for health inequities - the unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries.

- WHO

- Health inequities are *avoidable* inequalities in health between groups of people within countries and between countries. These inequities arise from inequalities within and between societies. Social and economic conditions and their effects on people's lives determine their risk of illness and the actions taken to prevent them becoming ill or treat illness when it occurs.

- WHO

www.healthypeople.gov
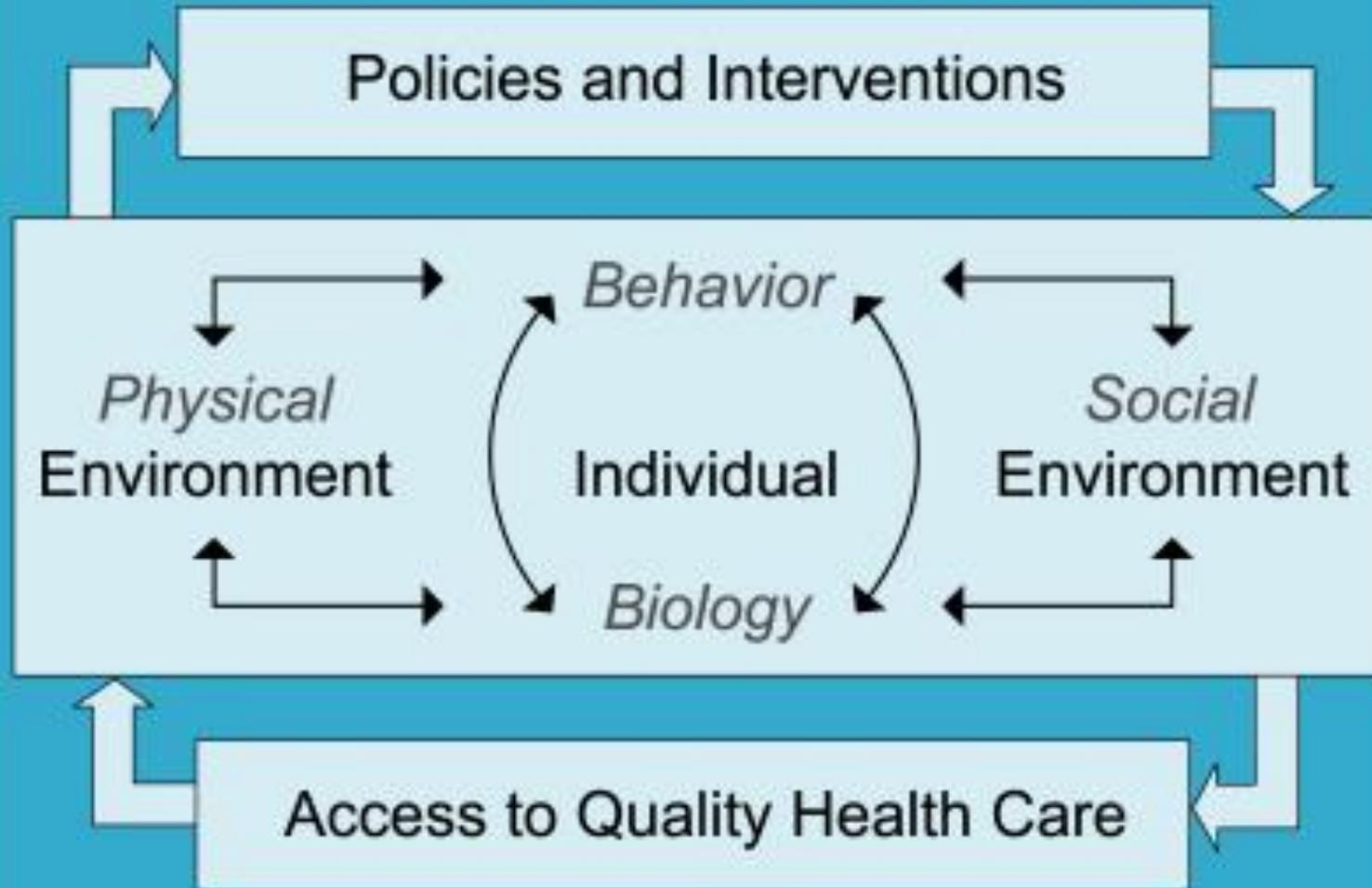
The Social Gradient

- Life expectancy is shorter and most diseases are more common the further down the social ladder in each society

- Health policy must tackle the social and economic determinants of health

- Policy implications
  - Good health requires reducing levels of educational failure, reducing insecurity & unemployment, and improving housing standards

Stress

- Stressful circumstances that make people feel worried, anxious, and unable to cope are damaging to health and may lead to premature death

- Policy Implication
  - Government should recognize that welfare programs need to address both psychosocial & material needs. In particular, support families with young children, encourage community activity, combat social isolation, reduce material & financial insecurity, and promote coping skills in education and rehabilitation

Biobehavioral Model
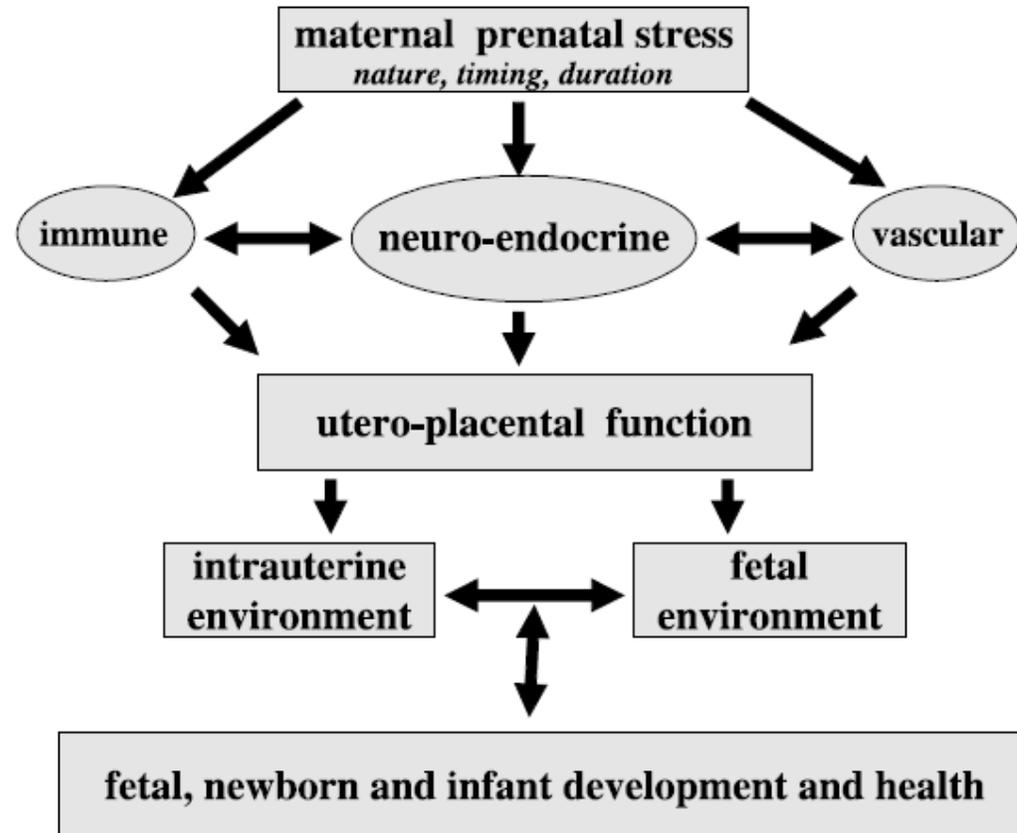
Early Life

- A good start in life means supporting mothers and young children: the health impact of early development and education lasts a lifetime

- Policy Implications
  - Increase the general level of education and provide equal opportunity of access to education
  - Provide good nutrition, health education, and health & preventive care facilities, before first pregnancies, during pregnancy, and throughout infancy
  - Ensure that parent-child relationships are supported from birth through home visiting and the encouragement of good parental relations with schools

Social Exclusion

- Life is short where quality is poor. By causing hardship and resentment, poverty, social exclusion and discrimination cost lives

- Policy implications
    - All citizens should be protected by minimum wage guarantees, minimum wages legislation and access to services
    - Interventions to reduce poverty & social exclusion are needed at both the individual and neighborhood levels
    - Legislation can help protect minorities and vulnerable groups from discrimination and social isolation
    - Public health policies should remove barriers to health care, social services and affordable housing
    - Labor market, education and family welfare policies should aim to reduce social stratification

Work

- Stress in the workplace increases the risk of disease. People who have more control over their work have better health

- Policy implications
  - Good management involves ensuring appropriate rewards – in terms of money, status and self-esteem - for all employees
  - Workplaces must be ergonomically appropriate
  - Workplace health protection should provide effective infrastructure with legal controls & powers of inspection and also include workplace health services with staff trained in the early detection of mental health problems & appropriate interventions
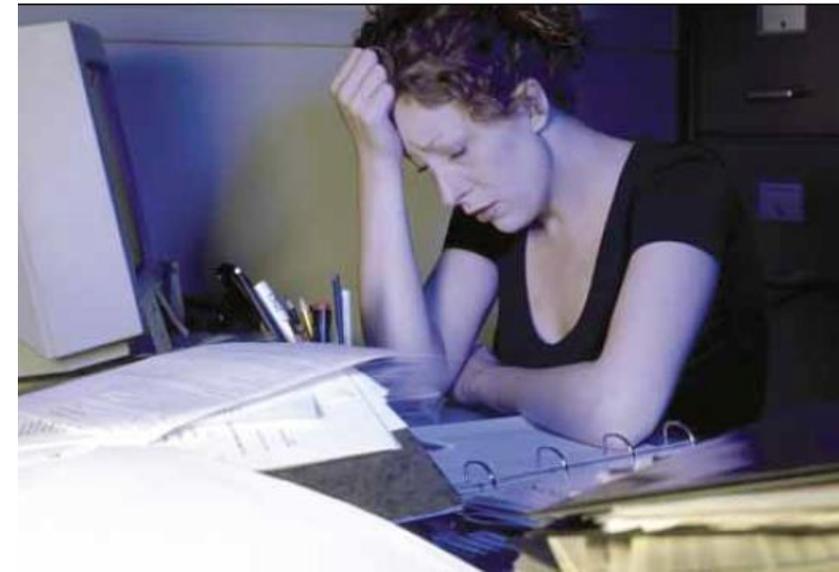
Unemployment

- Job security increases health, well-being and job satisfaction. Higher rates of unemployment cause more illness and premature death

- Policy implications
    - Government management of the economy to reduce the highs and lows of the business cycle can make an important contribution to job security & the reduction on unemployment
    - Provide high standards of education and good retraining schemes
    - Unemployment benefits set at a higher proportion of wages are likely to have a protective effect
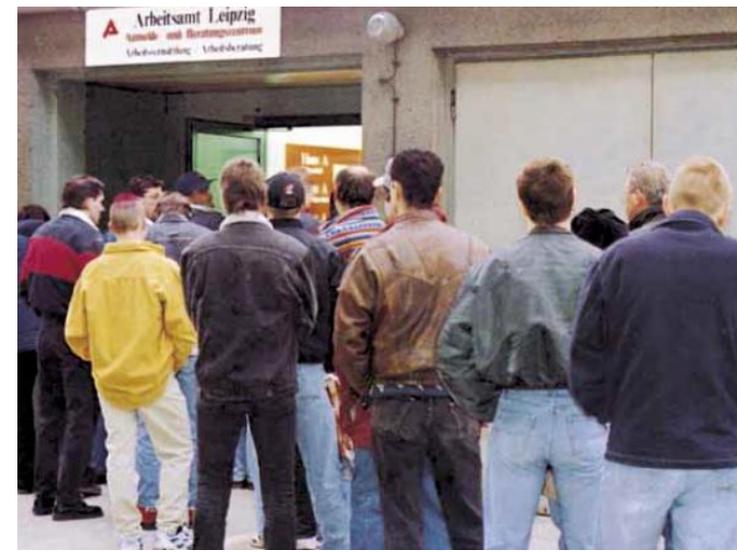
Social Support

- Friendship, good social relations and strong supportive networks improve health at home, at work and in the community

- Policy implications
  - Reducing social & economic inequalities and reducing social exclusion can lead to greater social cohesiveness and better standards of health
  - Improving the social environment in schools, at work and in the community will help people feel valued & supported and will contribute to their health, especially their mental health
  - In all areas of both personal and institutional life, practices that cast some as socially inferior or less valuable should be avoided because they are socially divisive

Addiction

- Individuals turn to alcohol, drugs & tobacco and suffer from their use, but use is influenced by the wider social setting

- Policy implications
  - Addressing problems of both legal and illicit drug use needs to not only support & treat people who have developed addictive patterns of use, but also to address the social patterns of deprivation in which the problem is rooted
  - Policies to regulate availability, use health education to reduce the recruitment of young people and provide effective treatment services for the addicted
  - Effective drug policy must be supported by the broad framework of social and economic policy that address the underlying social issues

Food

- Because global market forces control the food supply, healthy food is a political issue

- Policy implications
  - The integration of public health perspectives into the food system to provide affordable & nutritious fresh food for all, especially the most vulnerable
  - Support for sustainable agriculture and food production methods that conserve natural resources & the environment
  - A stronger food culture for health, especially through school education, to foster people's knowledge of food & nutrition, cooking skills, growing food and the social value of preparing food and eating together
 - The availability of useful information about food, diet and health especially aimed at children

Transport

- Healthy transport means less driving and more walking and cycling, backed up by better public transport

- Policy implications
  - Roads should give precedence to cycling and walking for short trips
  - Public transportation should be improved for longer journeys with regular & frequent connections for rural areas
  - Reduce state subsidies for road building, increasing financial support for public transport & creating disincentives for business use of cars
  - Convert road space into green spaces & increase bus and cycle lanes

Social Determinants of Infant Mortality
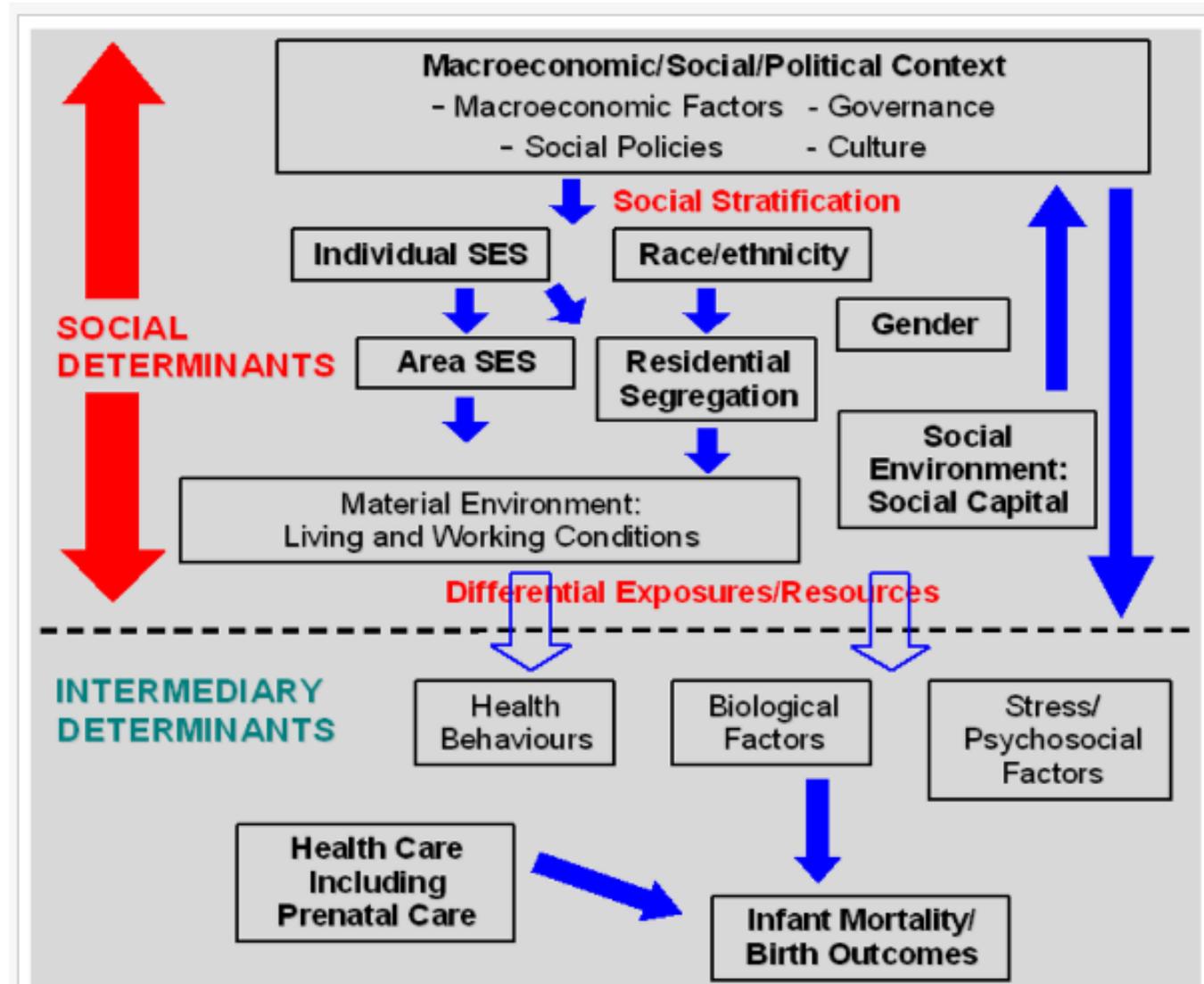
- Adapted from Solar & Irwin

Health in All Policies

"In keeping with the recent Adelaide Statement on Health in All Policies, at a societal level, both health and non-health policies that address the social determinants of health are needed to tackle infant mortality / birth outcome disparities. Implementing such policies while addressing key research gaps for the social determinants of infant mortality / birth outcomes may optimally reduce inequities in these vital health outcomes across and within the western industrialized world."

Kim & Saada, 2013