

## BOOK REVIEW • BOOK REVIEW

**Understanding Health Inequalities in Aotearoa New Zealand**

Edited by Kevin Dew and Anna Matheson

This well-researched book has made a timely appearance, being published in the middle of an election year.

The 24 contributing authors have based their writing on some excellent academic reports from local experts, and there is a strong public health focus.

Trends in health inequities are revealed, confirming the suspicions of many of us working at the health 'coal face'. Examples of disparity in our country (once portrayed as the land of plenty) are discussed. Some solutions are suggested.

If you are poor, and you live in a cold, damp, crowded house in a deprived area, and have low educational achievements, then you are likely to have negative health outcomes. For Maori, this situation is magnified. Maori have higher rates of obesity, smoking, cancer, cardiovascular and respiratory disease, youth suicide, and infant mortality than non-Maori.

The relationship between poverty and health is complicated. Ethnic factors also play a major part, with many problems originating more than 150 years ago (colonisation being a major negative influence).

Poverty in children in this country is a serious issue, and we have some of the worst child health statistics in the world. Government measures regarding financial support for poorer families are not yet ideal.

More recently, in the 1980s and 1990s, social and economic policies (such as Rogernomics) changed life in New Zealand significantly. Over this period, less well-off people experienced more disease, disability and mortality than more privileged individuals. These trends show no signs of abating yet.

Solving these equity problems will never be straightforward. However there are some suggestions towards the end of the book.

The authors describe current issues regarding the Primary Health Care Strategy, where there seems to be some promise of improving outcomes. Trying to find the appropriate formula to match need is a challenge. It is hoped more focussed care (with the aim of reducing morbidity in high risk communities and individuals) can be effective. Chronic disease management will require extra support.

Improving housing conditions is a priority, and the retrofitting of insulation in cold, old homes is a worthwhile project.

Partnership with Maori in health projects seems to be crucial in achieving improvements.

The successful Otara Health programme is discussed, describing the growth of a community team working to solve local problems (such as housing, and meningococcal vaccination coverage). Seven years on it now attracts PHO funding.

This book will appeal to anyone working in the health, education, housing and social policy fields, particularly where the focus is on deprived regions. It has plenty of detail for those who wish to get below the surface.

The problems described are for the whole New Zealand community to solve however.

The comprehensive data and ideas presented will also need to be absorbed and acted upon by our political representatives.

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