

research snapshot

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Physicians Can Impact Policy that Supports Children's Health

What is this research about?

Living conditions have a strong impact on the health of Canadian children. These conditions – also known as the social determinants of health – are influenced, in large part, by public policy. For example, public policy helps to determine the distribution of income and housing. In other words, it helps to shape the circumstances to which children are exposed.

In social democratic nations like Sweden, public policies work to support children's health by improving their living conditions. These nations emphasize social justice over the market; they believe that everyone should have enough income to live a decent life. In liberal welfare states like Canada, however, the situation is much different. Canadian governments tend to avoid the sort of universal programs that guarantee a good quality of life for all of its citizens. These programs run counter to Canada's market economy, which values the interests of the individual over those of the community. The programs that do offer social assistance in Canada, while vital, tend to target only the most disadvantaged children and families. For the most part, people in Canada must take care of themselves.

But although it is hard to influence policymakers – who are often invested in the status quo – physicians represent an important part of Canadian society that can be empowered to make an impact on the health of children. They can work through their professional organizations to influence public policy. They can

What you need to know:

Canada is a liberal welfare state. It favours the needs of the individual over the needs of the community. Policymakers need to enact public policy that improves the living conditions that impact the health of children. Physicians can help to educate the public about the social determinants of health. They can have an impact on public policy.

become politically active and act to influence political parties and their elected representatives. Physicians can also participate in public education programs that target their patients and their families.

What did the researcher do?

Dennis Raphael, Professor in the School of Health Policy & Management at York University, set out to explore the health of Canada's children in a four-part study. In the fourth part, Raphael provided physicians with an understanding of how child-related public policy is made. He also suggested ways in which physicians can promote children's health.

What did the researcher find?

Public policy is often driven by powerful interests. In Canada, these interests tend to be based in the market and have powerful partners in the political arena. As a result, there is a need for strong social and political movements that can force policymakers

to enact public policy that improves the living conditions and health of children. These grassroots activities will involve community education, the building of social movements, and a shift in how people think about the role that government should play in assuring their security.

Physicians are well-placed to play a role in improving the living conditions and health of Canadian children. To begin with, they can focus on education. The public, after all, remains misinformed about the living conditions that shape the health of children. At the very least, physicians can place in waiting rooms materials that provide information on the social determinants of health and what people can do to promote public policy in the service of their children's health. Also, physicians who take part in academic activities such as research and teaching can work to publicize their findings.

Physicians can also support the policies that best impact children's health. This is a more important role – but a more challenging one, too. Increasing evidence shows that the governing political party of a particular area does a lot to shape the living conditions that influence the health of children. Campaign 2000 recently ranked the federal parties in terms of their willingness to take on child poverty. The New Democratic party was first, the Liberal party second, and the Conservative party third. In general, living conditions are better for children's health in countries where there has been greater rule by social democratic parties. In fact, even conservative parties do better than liberal governments. Proportional representation of voters also leads to greater public support of health. Ultimately, physicians can put their support behind political initiatives that best service the health of Canadian children.

How can you use this research?

Policymakers need to put in place public policies that improve the living conditions that contribute to the health of Canadian children. Physicians can support this effort by educating the public and getting involved

in policy action. Medical associations such as the Ontario Physicians Poverty Work Group and Health Providers Against Poverty provide opportunities for physicians to become engaged in the social determinants of health. In fact, there is no shortage of organizations in which physicians can take part. The readers of *Paediatrics & Child Health*, the only peer-reviewed paediatric journal in Canada, are in the best position to suggest future courses of action for physicians.

About the Researcher

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Knowledge Mobilization at York

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