
Reports on social inequalities in health have been a prominent feature of public health research over the last 20 years. That work has focused on documenting, and to a lesser extent attempting to explain the health inequalities that exist between different social groups. Mitchell, Dorling and Shaw take this stream of research in a new direction—they focus on what population health in Britain might be. Their 60 page report has two key aims: to determine how much of the change in the demographic and geographical patterns of premature mortality in Britain can be accounted for by social changes; and second, to put an empirical face on what has been one of the implicit questions in health inequalities research—what would happen to population health if we actually redressed some of the social inequalities? There has been great interest but very little research on the population health effects of changing the structural factors that help generate health inequalities. This is partly because we have failed to take advantage of the ‘natural experiments’ that occur when alterations to policy have been made, and even when policy evaluations have been undertaken, the potential health effects of policy change have usually been ignored.

Chapter 2 of Inequalities in Life and Death asks what population health in Britain would be like under three different scenarios—what if there were full employment for all; what if there were a modest redistribution of income, and what if there were an end to child poverty? Far from being a flight into the world of idealistic policy utopias, the authors stress that each of the policies being examined is both real and current. This is not a “blue sky” report; it is based on changes to life in Britain which may be happening now.’ (p.1) The authors simulate mortality yields under each scenario, using information on the age, sex, social class and employment distributions of mortality across parliamentary constituencies in Britain. The conciseness of the report belies the huge amount of work—the authors estimate 0.3 billion calculations—that were required to complete the analysis.

Under the first scenario, the report calculates the mortality effect of providing employment for all the currently unemployed aged 16–64 in every constituency in Britain. This is simulated by assigning the mortality rates of the employed to the unemployed. The bottom line is that full employment would reduce premature mortality by 2% overall. For scenario 2, if there were a modest redistribution of wealth back to the levels of inequality that existed in the 1980s, there would be a 37% overall reduction in premature mortality. For me, an even more compelling conclusion in scenario 2 is that existed in the 1980s, there would be a 37% overall reduction in premature mortality. For me, an even more compelling conclusion in scenario 2 is that even when policy evaluations have been undertaken, the potential health effects of policy change have usually been ignored.

The specifics of the findings will be of particular interest to British readers, but the approach is one that has much broader application, that could be usefully applied in other countries as well. The use of easily interpreted cartograms (special maps that give equal population representation to all areas, regardless of their geographical size) and clear concise tables makes this report accessible and relevant to policy makers, public health practitioners and academics. This is applied public health research at its best.

JOHN LYNCH


This book was a revelation to me and is likely to be regarded as one of the most important books of the current era. Sen’s main objective is to bypass (and critique) the widely held current ideology that the best means of ‘development’ is to increase the rate of economic growth. In contrast he argues that the main purpose of development is to spread freedom to the unfree. In doing so he claims back two words that have functioned as key parts of the political and economic orthodoxy of the past few decades: ‘development’ and ‘freedom’. Most people would agree that the main aim of life is not just to make money (or to accumulate Frequent Flyer Miles), and that this is simply a means to an end. However, few people, and fewer economists, would agree on what the real ‘meaning of life’ is, or for that matter what the purpose of ‘development’ is. This has left the field wide open for the current dominant ideology to equate ‘development’ with economic development and to argue that all the good things in life flow from this. In response to this, some commentators have attempted to add a human face to the current economic orthodoxy, e.g. through the use of explicitly economic terms such as ‘human capital’ and ‘social capital’