Editorial

More uncertainty about public health and reducing inequalities

For those of us committed to reducing health inequalities by way of public health policies and interventions, these are heady and disturbing times. Disturbing, because on the best available evidence, inter-regional economic inequalities in the UK are much larger than those in many other high-income countries, and growing. The consequences are drearily familiar to those of us who live and work in regions where the economy and social fabric have been devastated first by deindustrialization, and more recently by austerity. Heady, because of the international scrutiny and shaming that may follow the recent visit of the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights to the United Kingdom.

Prof. Philip Alston’s full report is anticipated in June 2019. His preliminary statement strongly criticized HM Government for remaining ‘determinedly in a state of denial’ about the human consequences of ‘the dismantling of the broader social safety net’. He further emphasized that ‘poverty is a political choice. Austerity could easily have spared the poor, if the political will had existed to do so. Resources were available to the Treasury at the last budget that could have transformed the situation of millions of people living in poverty, but the political choice was made to fund tax cuts for the wealthy instead’.

There are striking similarities between this critique and one he co-wrote with several other United Nations colleagues earlier in 2018 about the human consequences of writing austerity into the Brazilian constitution. In each case, and in many others we could cite, power asymmetries within the society in question appear to have ruled out alternative policy trajectories that would redistribute resources in ways that would attenuate, or even reverse, the human consequences of what has been called the ‘inequality machine’ that is reshaping the planet. And the UK-Brazil comparison, despite obvious differences between the countries, suggests on the one hand the equity-enhancing potential of analyses based on economic and social rights, and on the other hand a dispiriting form of global convergence on high and rising inequality. In urban settings, this convergence is dramatically shown in aerial photographs from around the world on a remarkable website, https://www.unequalscenes.com/. Are these templates for the future?

Like previous recent issues, this one features findings from around the world. It includes a number of articles that signal the health consequences of the ‘inequality machine’, close to home and far away. For example, Prayogo and colleagues observe that benefit-related problems—part of the dismantling noted by Alston—appear to be a key reason for reliance on foodbanks. This reinforces findings from earlier research by Garthwaite and others. Mercille warns about the negative consequences for equitable access to care of privatization in the Irish hospital sector, in a paper that suggests interesting parallels with a recent Journal article on private sector provision in Scotland. And in a provocative study of Iranian trauma patients, Abedzadeh-Kalahroudi and colleagues find a socioeconomic gradient in risk of receiving inadequate hospital care and support for returning to work.

We also offer findings on the quotidian issues facing public health practice, such as how to improve the diets offered by hospital shops without placing them in financial peril.

And we invite readers to consider hard questions about how best to structure public health training and career trajectories to incorporate needed multidisciplinary perspectives, of a kind we have tried to nurture in our role as editors. These are just examples of the rich array of content on offer in this issue—which, once again, incorporates a substantial online-only section in the interests of reaching a wide audience as quickly as possible.

Finally, we would like to draw readers’ attention to the call for new editorial leadership that immediately follows this and the accompanying guest editorial. After 5 years, we agree that it is time to move on, and for new protagonists to take over our editorial roles, as part of a redesigned editorial structure that responds to the increased number of submissions to the Journal and to their methodological diversity, which we regard as one of the Journal’s major strengths. We hope there will be widespread enthusiasm, and encourage expressions of interest.

Ted Schrecker, Eugene Milne

References


5 Halimi S. Tyranny of the one per cent. Le Monde Diplomatique (English edition); May 2013.


