The Challenge of the Health Gradient

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Definitions

• Social inequalities in health = statistical correlations between various indicators of socioeconomic status and various health measures
• Indicators of socioeconomic status: education, occupation, income
• Health indicators: mortality, morbidity, perceived general health (+ risk factors and social security benefits)
• Measures of inequality may be absolute or relative
Mortality by education. Age-adjusted, deaths per 100,000

Source: Norwegian Institute of Public Health
Symptoms of depression and anxiety (HSCL>1.75) by level of education (%)

Source: Norwegian Institute of Public Health
Social inequalities in health in Norway

• concern all age-groups
• concern both sexes
• are significant regardless of how social status is measured
• have been demonstrated for several health indicators
• have persisted over time and may even be increasing
• form a gradient throughout the population: the higher your socioeconomic position, the better your health
Causes

**Socioeconomic inequalities**
(education, occupation, income)

- selection
- behavioural
- psychosocial
- materialist
- health service

**Health differences**
(mortality, morbidity, self-reported health, accidents, social security benefits etc.)
Causes: time and space

• Social inequalities in health begin early in life
• Negative causal factors tend to accumulate over the life course
• Different risk factors also tend to work on the same groups of people
The challenge of the gradient (1): What kind of measures work?

- Lack of full causal knowledge should not prevent us from acting
- Measures should be directed towards the entire population (not only high-risk groups)
- Measures should be directed towards social structures (not only towards individual behaviour)
The challenge of the gradient (2):
The stream of determinants

**Upstream**
Social reform
Labourmarket
Taxes
Housing

**Midstream**
Risk reduction
Environment
Behaviour
Psychosocial

**Downstream**
Effect reduction
Health services

Reduction of social inequalities in health
The challenge of the gradient (3):
Comprehensive strategies

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<th>Upstream</th>
<th>Midstream</th>
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<tr>
<td>Universal</td>
<td>education, taxes, labour market policies, housing</td>
<td>working environment, living environment</td>
<td>health service reform</td>
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<td>measures</td>
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<td>Selective</td>
<td>social security, child welfare</td>
<td>targeted lifestyle measures</td>
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The next step: cross-sectoral action

• A national cross-sectoral strategy is being developed by the Ministry of Health and Care Services

• Key challenges for a national strategy:
  • the challenge of the gradient
  • making health matter in all branches of government