

Are More Equal Societies Healthier?

Dr Jane Wilde, Chief Executive of the Institute of Public Health opened with a quote

“All diseases have two causes, one pathological, the other political”.

Virchow (1821-1902)

After briefly looking at challenges that affect us all such as an ageing population and obesity, Dr Wilde looked at how the poor and the disadvantaged have much worse health than the rest of us. There are staggering differences in health between social groups in Ireland. There are higher mortality rates and higher incidents of heart disease amongst poorer socio-economic groups. Almost half (47%) of people who were in income poverty reported having a chronic illness compared to 23% of the general population, while travellers live on average 10 to 12 years less than the general population.

Dr Wilde argued that is not sufficient to say that things may not get much worse, but rather how can we make things better for those who are affected. The WHO and the EU are examining health equity and the social determinants of health focusing on how to improve daily living conditions, tackle the inequitable distribution of resources and adequately measure and understand the problem.

Referring to research by *Wilkinson and Pickett*, life expectancy is not related to income per head. Health is related to income differences within rich societies but not to differences between them. In countries where there are higher rates of income inequality, health and social problems are worse. The prevalence of mental illness, obesity, teenage birth rates and homicide rates are all higher in more unequal rich countries. Conversely more equal richer countries have higher levels of child well-being, levels of trust, educational scores and life expectancy.

In terms of income inequality Ireland rates higher than Denmark or Sweden. Dr Wilde asked why is it, that with what we know we do not address this issue?

“No variation in the health of states of Europe is the result of chance; it is the direct result of physical and political conditions in which nations live.”

Farr (1807-1883)