
The more prosperous and healthy our population, the less need there will be for illness oriented health care services and the social safety net we are committed to maintaining. These are important social initiatives and will probably always be required to some degree. However, they currently consume a large part of our national resources. An effective strategy to foster population health and well-being should make some of these resources available for other more productive purposes.

Canada prides itself on having a society that values and offers its residents good health and quality of life. For example, social stability, economic well-being, safety and meaningful and satisfying work are assets Canadians value and expect. These are the same factors that an effective population health approach would emphasize, the very factors that contribute most to good health for individuals, groups and the entire population. So a population health approach is a natural and logical strategy for governments to adopt, as part of their obligation to citizens.

Although some of the benefits of a population health approach will accrue primarily in the longer term, there are also more immediate benefits to be realized. For example, there is increasing evidence that initiatives to promote health in the workplace and improve the quality of work life increase employee satisfaction and productivity almost immediately. And those effects tend to be sustained, so long as the positive working conditions are maintained. At the same time, such initiatives have long term beneficial effects on the health status of employees, effects that seem to result from reductions in stress and an increased sense of control, both of which are key determinants of health discussed later in this paper.

The Determinants of Health: What Makes People Healthy?

There is a growing body of evidence about what makes people healthy. The Lalonde Report set the stage in 1974, by establishing a framework for the key factors that seemed to determine health status: lifestyle, environment, human biology and health services. Since then, much has been learned that supports, and at the same time refines and expands this basic framework. In particular, there is mounting evidence that the

contribution of medicine and health care is quite limited, and that spending more on health care will not result in further improvements in population health. On the other hand, there are strong and growing indications that other factors such as living and working conditions are crucially important for a healthy population.

The evidence indicates that the key factors which influence population health are income and social status, social support networks, education, employment and working conditions, safe and clean physical environments, biology and genetic make-up, personal health practices and coping skills, childhood development, and health services. Each of these factors is important in its own right. At the same time, the factors are interrelated.

The rest of this section gives an overview of what we know about the ways these factors influence health.

Income and Social Status

There is strong and growing evidence that higher socio-economic status is associated with better health. In fact, these two factors seem to be the most important determinants of health. People's perception of how healthy they are is linked to their income level, as shown in Figure 1.

There is extensive research that demonstrates the links between income and health status. One Canadian study found that men in the top 20% income bracket live on average six years longer than those in the bottom 20%, and can expect 14 more years of life free of activity restrictions. Women in the top 20% can expect three more years of life than those in the bottom 20%, and eight more years free of activity restrictions.' Studies in provinces and cities in all parts of Canada consistently show that people at each step on the income scale are healthier than those on the step below. Figure 2 illustrates this with data from Winnipeg, where the rate of premature death (before age 65) decreases at each step of the income scale, from the bottom to the top 20%.

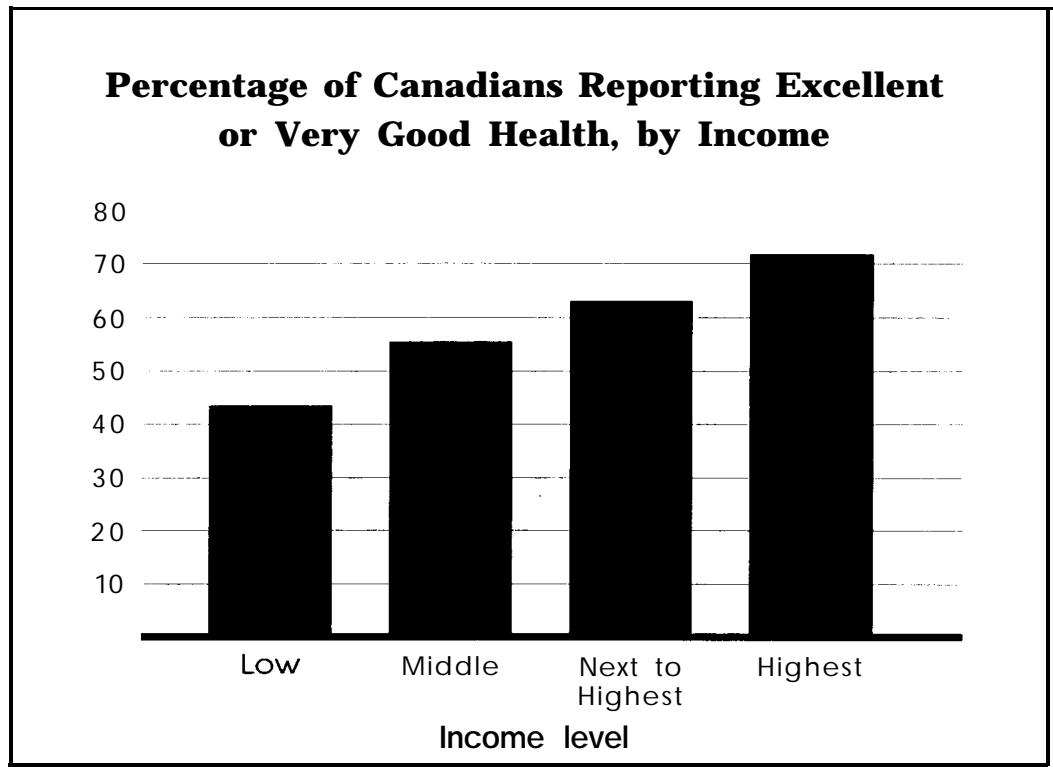


Figure 1. Source: Statistics Canada General Social Survey, 1991.

A recent World Bank report² concludes that “Economic policies conducive to sustained growth are among the most important measures governments can take to improve their citizens’ health.” As well, many studies demonstrate that the more equitable the distribution of wealth, the healthier the population. Japan provides a good example. Over a 30 year period, Japan has moved from being a country with high infant mortality rates and low life expectancy, to having some of the best health status indicators in the world. During the same period, the Japanese economy soared, and incomes increased significantly. As well, Japan now has a very equitable distribution of wealth, with the smallest relative difference in income between the top and bottom 20% of any OECD country. Interestingly, Japan spends only 6.8% of its GDP on health care, compared to about 10% in Canada.