

Department of Health Policy Research Programme: Inequalities in Health

Christine McGuire

The purpose of the Department of Health (DH) Policy Research Programme (PRP) is to provide, through high quality research, a knowledge base for health services policy, social services policy and central policies directed at the health of the population as a whole. This article gives an overview of current work within the PRP relating to inequalities in health.

Inequalities in Health Research Initiative

A major part of PRP funding is allocated to the development of thematic programmes of research and in 1997 a £2.4 million research initiative on inequalities in health was launched.

Priorities for the initiative were established through consultation with policy makers and academics. The Institute of Education, London University, and the University of Salford were approached to organise workshops to identify key themes to be included in the call for proposals, as well as exploring the Department of Health's potential role in research and development (R&D) in inequalities in health. The ensuing report recommended that commissioned projects should be of an applied nature and the themes identified included the actual and potential impact of: alliances; matching resources to need; the promotion of equitable access; different models of commissioning; formulation of new approaches to service development; evaluation of service and community-based interventions.

The eight projects funded under the initiative to date are:

- **Effect of out-of-home day-care on the health and welfare of socially disadvantaged families with children: a randomised controlled trial** - Ian Roberts (Institute of Child Health) and Ann Oakley (Institute of Education, London)
- **Reducing inequalities in health by increasing breastfeeding uptake** - Mike Woolridge (Mother and Infant Research Unit, Leeds)
- **Evaluating a community-based anti-smoking intervention in a low income area: a quasi experimental study** - Stephen Platt (RUHBC, Edinburgh)
- **Investigating ethnic and geographic variations in sexual health in south east London** - Nicola Low (Department of Social Medicine, Bristol)
- **Inequalities in mental health: a systematic review** David Melzer (Institute of Public Health, Cambridge) and Rachel Jenkins (Institute of Psychiatry, London)
- **Commissioning for equity: how can health authorities become more effective in tackling inequalities in health** - Michaela Benzeval (Department of Geography, Queen Mary and Westfield College, London)

- **Health impact assessment: measuring the effect of public policy on variations in health** - Alex Hirschfield (URPERRL, Liverpool) and Alex Scott Samuel (Department of Public Health, Liverpool)
- **Evaluation of the impact of an equity audit** - Alex Scott-Samuel and Margaret Whitehead (Department of Public Health, Liverpool)

Other PRP projects

A number of other projects in the wider PRP portfolio are relevant to policy as outlined in the recent DH publication Reducing Health Inequalities: An Action Report. For example:

- *Healthy Communities*: Research is underway to assess the impact of Health Action Zones (HAZ) and another project exploring healthy living centres is in planning.
- *Health impact assessment*: Expert papers commissioned as part of a DH methodological seminar have been published as a report. Health indicators have been included in the Employment Service's evaluation of New Deal for Young People.
- *Housing*: Research has recently been completed on access to primary care for rough sleepers.
- *Nutrition*: An R&D research initiative on nutrition includes research on vulnerable groups, healthy diets and dietary change.
- *Tobacco*. The evaluation of the HAZ initiative has been extended to look at the implementation of the smoking cessation strategy announced in the tobacco White paper.
- *Public Health R&D strategy*. Work is underway on a cross government strategy.

Further details on the work of the Policy Research Programme can be found on the DH website (www.doh.gov.uk).

The Department of Health can be contacted at:
Richmond House, 79 Whitehall, London
SW1A 2NL, Tel: +44 (0)20-72104850
(10.00 - 17.00 Monday - Friday)
email: dhmail@doh.gsi.gov.uk

Christine McGuire is Research Liaison Officer for the Policy Research Programme in the Research and Development Division of the Department of Health.