

Inequality kills on a grand scale

Juha Mikkonen and Dennis Raphael published a book on the Canadian social determinants of health in May. They offer a new point of view to health. - Health is not just health services, says Mikkonen. The story appeared earlier in Finnish in Vapaa Sana issue 24 (15.6.2010).

"Social injustice is killing people in a grand scale", states World Health Organization report on Social Determinants of Health.

The quote can also be found in Juha Mikkonen's and Dennis Raphael's recently published pamphlet *Social Determinants of Health: The Canadian Facts*.

- Health is not just health services, says the co-author of the pamphlet Juha Mikkonen.

- If we want to improve the well-being of citizens, then health should be understood as a broader social and societal phenomenon. The contemporary way of thinking health is that it is an individualistic issue and that everybody should take care of their own health. But as a matter of fact, factors that have a strong impact on health and quality of life include one's social status, income, work place and neighborhood, Mikkonen says.

He says that health is a combination of things that individuals often cannot influence.

I ask him if he denies one's responsibility for oneself.

-Of course not, individuals have a personal responsibility for themselves, but we have to understand that one's responsibility has limits.

Mikkonen says that the environment has a larger impact that is often considered.

- If we want to promote health in general, we have to influence the surrounding environments and living conditions, he tells.

Moreover, Mikkonen states that the government health campaigns have little effect in people's lives.

However, individual choices are not totally insignificant. In *The Canadian Facts* Mikkonen and Raphael demand government to ensure that healthy foods (e.g. milk, fruits, and foods high in fiber) are affordable. If government would subsidi-

dize healthy food, people would probably buy it more and would enjoy the benefits of eating healthy.

On the other hand, Mikkonen says, making healthy choices demand a lot of strength, and if everyday life is a constant struggle, you might not have enough physical and mental energy to make healthy choices.

Nevertheless, there is a broad consensus on the fact that prevention is always more effective than curing diseases and sicknesses, Mikkonen says.

- Improving the social determinants of health would benefit both employers and employees as the workers would not go on the sick leave that much and the health care system would need less resources. It would also enhance social cohesion in the society.

The Determinants

In their pamphlet Mikkonen and Raphael list 14 social determinants of health. For example, they list gender, race, disabilities, social safety net and social exclusion as determinants of health.

The most important determinants according to Mikkonen are income and income distribution, and early childhood development.

- A British professor Richard Wilkinson has written many papers on how income differences correlate with life expectancy and health. One of his conclusions is that a high level of income inequality has a strong correlation with social problems and it deteriorates mutual trust between people. And the differences between life expectancy are great as you can read from our book, Mikkonen tells.

Indeed they are. Men in the poorest fifth of the population live on average 74.7 years while men in the top fifth live to be 79 years old on average.

Even though income inequality has a big impact, early childhood development might have even stronger effect. Children living under poor conditions are more likely to have an underprivileged life.

- There are lots of good examples of the benefits of universal day care. It improves the health of children and children attending day care usually fare good in the life later on, Mikkonen says.

What is wrong with social democracy?

Mikkonen and Raphael propose improvements and policy suggestions to the problems they pose in their pamphlet. Some of the proposals overlap and there are some duplicates too. For example, Mikkonen and Raphael suggest that "providing a national affordable high quality childcare program would provide opportunities for women to

engage in the workplace and improve their financial situations." High quality childcare is also proposed to improve the quality of early childhood development.

Furthermore, it is interesting to notice that Mikkonen and Raphael would like to raise the minimum wage and state that "collective and organized action through the unionization of workplaces is an important means of balancing power between employers and employees."

- They are meant to improve the status of the employees, Mikkonen says.

- Unionization is just one example employee status can be improved, he continues.

Many of the policy implications proposed by Mikkonen and Raphael could be defined as socialist. The S-word has a bad tone in North America, but Mikkonen says that people should not be afraid of words and ideas.

- Besides, I would call our policy implications rather social democratic than socialist.

He also marvels at the neoliberal trend in the world where welfare states are dismantled little by little.

- The Nordic social democratic states are doing the best according to health indicators, and World Economic Forum WEF states that the Nordic states are amongst the most competitive countries in the world, but still the social development is towards the liberal Anglo-American welfare model, where individuals have the responsibility and the state provides only a small social safety net.

Mikkonen has a justified question: What is wrong with the social democratic welfare model?

Income differences have grown during the past 20 years, and if Professor Wilkinson is to be believed, also health inequality has increased.

- The changes in Nordic countries are not that drastic as in other countries. Community planning and social policies have been good in Scandinavia.

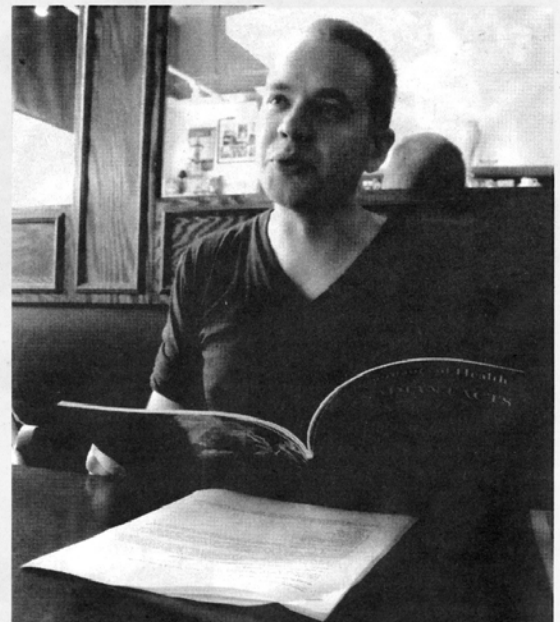
Doing well, Canada?

Canada is thought to be on the top of developed countries regarding social and health policies. Canadians are proud of their health care system especially.

- The Canadian health care system functions well, Mikkonen says.

- The health care system is focused on giving treatment and medication for diseases and sicknesses harmful to your health and it lets the private sector to take care of the cosmetic surgeries.

The Canadian health care system works as an example to other countries, and there is a lot to be learned. However, before modeling Canadian health services, there is a need to take a look at *The Canadian Facts*:



Juha Mikkonen has been working on similar issues such as poverty in Finland.

"While Canada is in the mid-range of public spenders on health care [14th of 30 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) nations], it is amongst the lowest in its coverage of total health care costs. Medicare covers only 70% of total health care costs - the rest is covered by private insurance plans and out-of-pocket spending - which gives Canada a rank of 22nd of 30 OECD nations for the public coverage of health care costs. Medicare does not cover drug costs, and the coverage of home care and nursing costs varies among provinces."

Furthermore, Mikkonen's and Raphael's pamphlet reveals other sobering statistics about Canada: "According to the OECD, 15 percent of Canadian children live in poverty, putting Canada at a rank of 20th out of 30 of the world's wealthiest nations.

Canada is among the nations with the greatest gap between men's and women's earnings. Canada ranks 19th of 22 OECD nations in reducing the earnings gap between men and women.

Only 17 percent of Canadian families have access to regulated child care. Canada ranked last among 25 wealthy developed nations in meeting various early childhood development objectives."

"Contact"

The *Canadian Facts* is satiated with ideology. In their policy implications Mikkonen and Raphael encourage people to contact their own MPs and MPPs to express their concerns.

- The purpose of this book is to increase people's awareness of the social determinants of health. We want to spur people to contact elect-

ed representatives and different organizations and make a change. If there are enough people taking contact, social pressure will grow so big that our policy implications will rise to the spheres of political decision-making, Mikkonen presents the goals of the pamphlet.

Mikkonen says that it all comes down to political will.

- We hear beautiful words in public speeches, but changes do not occur in the real life.

In addition, Mikkonen says that there needs to be a change in the thinking of collective responsibility in Canada.

- Here people think that taxes are something taken away from them. They do not see that they get anything back. It is a negative train of thought, there is less solidarity in here than in the Nordic countries, Mikkonen says.

Paying taxes is not considered as a part of collective responsibility, he summarizes.

- The politicians are to blame. They have not been able to show that money has been used in a reasonable way, and that the well-being of Canadians has been promoted. Due to that it is important that the politicians would be contacted, Mikkonen says

Social Determinants of Health: The *Canadian Facts* is available on the internet at: www.thecanadianfacts.org

TEXT AND PICTURE:
JOHANNES NIEMELÄINEN

