

Health Equity Video Transcript: Dr Mermin

Achieving health equity is the situation where everyone has the opportunity to be, and ideally is, as healthy as possible regardless of their social or economic circumstances. Our lives are influenced by the pillars of the social determinants of health: economic stability, education access and quality, health care, neighborhood and built environment, and social and community context.

Social determinants of health influence all of the infections and conditions under the purview of this center. The majority of health disparities are due to systemic factors that influence access to and use of health-related services, such as laws, policies and structures that influence income, education, racism, homophobia, transphobia, housing, health insurance, and transportation. Done well, leveraging social determinants of health creates long term change that prevents infections and brings us closer to public health justice.

Because positively influencing social determinants can make large-scale sustainable change that improves health outcomes, saves lives, and brings the nation closer to health equity.

Throughout the center, people are analyzing data through the lens of social determinants of health and supporting programs that work. Approximately 80% of our budget goes toward funding entities outside of CDC, primarily health departments, community organizations, and educational agencies. And we fund them to work with communities disproportionately affected by HIV, STDs, hepatitis, and tuberculosis. As part of this work, we support wraparound services and outreach programs that enable people to get tested, linked to care, avoid infection, and get vaccinated. With some of our human and financial assets, we conduct groundbreaking research and issue guidelines to address barriers to achieving optimal health. There is so much more that we do. Our labs have developed and evaluated diagnostic tools that can make it easier for people to get tested. Our epidemiologists analyze data to understand the underlying causes of disparities. And we bring essential prevention information to the public, partners and key populations.

My introduction to the influence of social determinants of health started with a personal experience. When I was a medical resident at San Francisco General Hospital, I learned how much individual health depends on a supportive society. I remember a patient I saw several times in the emergency department who had diabetes and a wound infection that eventually required amputation of his foot. Diabetes wound infections are hard to treat, but this man did not lose his foot because of that. He lost his limb because he was living on the street with no means of providing himself good wound care. And that situation was because the city had expensive housing, limited mental health services and ultimately policies that restricted the concept of care to medical care rather than a more holistic approach to public health and wellbeing.

So much has changed since the 1980s. We have a cure for Hepatitis C, highly effective HIV treatment, new regimens for tuberculosis, marriage equality is in full force and syringe service programs are becoming mainstream, but we still have major epidemics and massive disparities that continue to challenge our sense of whether our country is just. Any nation's policies and social environment typically create an inequitable situation unless we explicitly and thoughtfully work against it, reminding me that policies that address social determinants are an underutilized tool in public health.