Health inequality gap 'widening'

Health inequalities are widening despite government efforts to narrow the gap, independent experts say.

The government pledged to reduce the inequality gap - measured by infant mortality and life expectancy - by 10% between 1997 and 2010.

But latest figures show that on both counts the gap between the poorest and population as a whole has increased.

The report by a government advisory group said progress had been made on child poverty and improving housing.

The Scientific Reference Group of Health Inequalities study also said the gap had narrowed for cancer and heart disease death rates.

Group chairman Professor Sir Michael Marmot said the reduction in child poverty already seen - from 1999 to 2004 it fell from 24% to 20% - would lead to a reduction in health inequalities, but not by 2010.

"This report gives no grounds for complacency that enough has yet been done."

But speaking on BBC Radio 4's Today programme, he said the figures needed to be set against "dramatic improvements" in the overall health of all social groups over the last 100 years.

"We'd still like it to be as good in the worst off groups as it is in the best - and it's improved more rapidly in the best off than it has in the worst off - but it's improved dramatically right across the board," he added.

To tackle inequality the government needed to look at "the circumstances in which people live and work, and the ways we raise our children, the standards of education", he said.

The Department of Health-commissioned report found the gap in life expectancy between the bottom fifth and the population as a whole had widened by 2% for males and 5% for females between 1997-9 and 2001-3.

HAVE YOUR SAY

"Without tackling wealth inequalities, which are widening, it is not going to be able to tackle health inequalities"

Professor Danny Dorling, health inequalities expert

"There is a huge misconception that healthy eating is expensive"

Karen, Southampton, England
The shift means the life expectancy in the wealthiest areas is seven to eight years longer than the poorest areas.

The gap in the infant mortality rate was 19% higher in 2001-3 between the poorest and general population, compared to 13% higher in 1997-9.

Health inequalities expert Danny Dorling, professor of human geography at the University of Sheffield, said he was not surprised by the findings.

"The government has some nice schemes, but without tackling wealth inequalities, which are widening, it is not going to be able to tackle health inequalities.

"This is the first Labour government that has failed to narrow the gap. It is astonishing after eight years and making reducing health inequality a key target that we are in this position."

But Public Health Minister Caroline Flint maintained the government could take something positive from the report.

"It shows encouraging signs that we are moving in the right direction on some of the problems associated with health inequalities."

She also unveiled the first 12 areas to get personalised health trainers, a scheme first unveiled in November’s Public Health White Paper.

Each area will be given £200,000 to provide personalised plans for people to improve their health and prevent diseases such as cancer and heart disease.

Initially targeted at the most deprived areas, the scheme will be rolled out to the rest of England by 2007.

AREAS TO GET HEALTH TRAINERS
- Bradford
- Tameside and Glossop
- South East London
- Manchester
- Gateshead
- West and Eastern Hull
- Kirklees
- Bristol
- Birmingham and the Black Country
- County Durham and Tees Valley
- Derbyshire
- Northumberland, Tyne and Wear
Health inequality gap 'widening'

8/11/2005

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4139440.stm