



Documentary highlights health disparities, economic divide

Film shows poor have healthier, shorter lives

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SAN FRANCISCO — Nearly 650 people jammed into a theater Tuesday evening to view what health policy experts are certain will be among the most influential documentaries affecting the health of U.S. citizens.

Across the country, more than 100 public health departments, including several Bay Area agencies, are queued up this spring to host town hall meetings with the film "Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?"

"We just didn't expect it to be this big," said Rachel Poulain, spokeswoman for California Newsreel, the San Francisco firm that produced the series. "The timing is right."

The series includes appearances by Dr. Anthony Iton, director of the Alameda County Public Health Department, and Dr. Wendel Brunner, his Contra Costa County counterpart. And county health departments around the state, including those in San Mateo, Alameda and Contra Costa, are planning events in the coming months around the series.

The series, which begins airing Friday, offers a new view on what's behind variation in health outcomes between the rich and poor, with those on the lowest socioeconomic rung suffering from the most diseases and dying younger.

The film opens by noting that although the country

spends \$2 trillion a year on health care — accounting for half the health expenditures worldwide — Americans rank 30th in life expectancy, compared with other nations, and more U.S. infants die per capita than those in Malta, Slovenia and Cyprus.

Health officials and activists, armed with a "Toolkit" provided by the film's producers, plan to use the film to stimulate dialogue, bring together community groups and hone specific goals to improve living conditions in their communities and ultimately the health of residents.


The National Association of County and City Health Officials already has 108 public health departments across the country committed to gathering citizens, political leaders, health experts and activists together for screenings to shine a light on this dark corner of health care policy, and more are expected to join in, a spokeswoman for the group said.

"Some things are easy to grasp, like universal access to health care," said Njoke Thomas, program manager with the Bay Area Regional Health Inequalities Initiative, which is collaborating with local health agencies to distribute the documentary. "What this does is make the less-tangible issues easily understood, and from that understanding, we'll see some real call for change."

While getting more people into doctors offices for checkups, screening and early treatment when needed are important for improving health outcomes, the film emphasized that diseases start long before one walks through a clinic door.

Poor health outcomes don't always simply result from unhealthy lifestyle choices, said Sherri Willis, spokeswoman with the Alameda County Public Health Department.


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"The public health perspective is to look at it holistically," Willis said. "There are a lot of environmental and social impediments to people doing what is expected of them."

For example, she explained, people may not feel safe walking in their neighborhoods, or fast-food outlets provide the only affordable meals near their homes.

It's the stress of day-to-day life that takes its toll, and those with the least economic and social clout bear the most stress, the filmmakers point out in a series of vignettes on rich and poor Americans.

Even though a CEO profiled had a demanding job, he also had much more control over his work-life than did his underlings portrayed in the film. And his leisure time was free from worries about finances, safety and health that clouded the thoughts of the lower-level workers.

Over the years, stress hormones such as cortisol that regularly circulate in those with chronic stress wear down immune systems, which can open the door to an array of diseases.

One Harvard University pediatrician in the film noted that for children, chronic stress can not only compromise immune systems, but can affect the developing brain, increasing the odds of lifelong health problems and premature death.

Racism only adds to the stress, researchers state in the film, noting that black Americans have far more chronic diseases and die younger than whites, even when both share the same economic status.

"It's a different way of looking at health," said Poulain, with California Newsreel.

Social class, in fact, is the most important

determinant of good health over any other risk factors, noted Leonard Syme, a University of California, Berkeley, epidemiologist interviewed in "Unnatural Causes."

Monkeys starkly reveal the effect of social class in the film. One macaque that held a dominant role over another macaque had far less cortisol circulating in his blood.

And medical images showed the subordinate macaque had arteries clogged with plaque and was at risk for a heart attack, while the dominant animal's arteries were clear. Both animals, researchers pointed out, were raised in the same environment, fed the same diet and were the same age.


A famous study on British workers, all of whom had access to health care due to universal coverage in that country, found that executives and managers had longer life-spans than midlevel managers, and blue collar workers had the shortest lives.

With grant money from numerous foundations, including the Ford Foundation, Kaiser Permanente and the California Endowment, California Newsreel developed a comprehensive Web site, <http://www.unnaturalcauses.org>, that provides film clips, interviews and abundant material. But unique to the film is the "Action Toolkit," which allows organizers to quickly arrange an action-oriented forum.

With the struggling economy, it's more urgent than ever to address the social and economic sources of ill health, added Julie Freestone of Contra Costa Health Services.

"Some of the disparities are just staggering already," Freestone said. "And with people losing their jobs and their health insurance, it's not a pretty picture. We certainly can't afford to lose any


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more ground."

"Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?" is scheduled to air weekly on PBS TV stations nationwide for four consecutive weeks, beginning tomorrow. Locally, KQED will air the show at 10 p.m. Thursdays. For more information, visit <http://www.unnaturalcauses.org>.

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