

AHIP CONFERENCE, SEPTEMBER 2006...

As one way of achieving its aims, the AHIP program organized a one-day conference in Adelaide in September 2006 to bring together national and international experts to discuss “Multi-disciplinary Approaches to Health Inequities Research”. It was attended by 170 Australian and overseas delegates. Key speakers included **Professor Barbara Starfield**, University Distinguished Professor at Johns Hopkins University & Medical Institutions, USA, and Chair of the International Scientific Committee for the International Society for Equity in Health. Barbara talked about “*Social and Societal Influences on Health*”.

Professor Starfield explained that “equity in health is the absence of systematic and potentially remediable differences in one or more aspects of health across population groups defined geographically, demographically, or socially”. She also pointed out the need to differentiate between social determinants (such as the level and distribution of wealth, occupational and environmental exposures) and societal determinants (including public expenditure on health and tax structures, the prevailing political ideology, globalization influences, and the nature of the health system). She was keen to note that equity research is not the same as research on social determinants because social determinants research assumes an individual model of health while equity research assumes a population model of health. Professor Starfield highlighted national differences in regressive versus progressive health systems and noted the importance of primary health care as a policy strategy to improve health equity.

Another international speaker was **Professor Ron Labonte**, former Director of the Saskatchewan Population Health & Evaluation Research Unit at the Universities of Saskatchewan and Regina in Canada. Ron talked about ways of establishing a successful multi-disciplinary team to conduct research on health inequities which would lead to action, respond to a political constituency, and proudly proclaim equity as its core. He highlighted the diversity of the team assembled at Saskatchewan to conduct integrated research as including two political scientists, two sociologists, a social epidemiologist, an economist, two anthropologists, two social workers, a health geographer and two sociologists. The work of the team is summarized in a recent article “Beyond the divides: towards critical public health research”, *Critical Public Health*, 2005, 15(1):5-17.

The Australian presenters included Professor Fran Baum, Head of the Department of Public Health at Flinders University and Commissioner on the WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, who talked about the importance of researching and publishing to enact change for people on the ground as well as for impact in the research community, and Associate Professor Anne Kavanagh from the Key Centre for Women’s Health at the University of Melbourne, who talked about methodological and epistemological challenges of multi-disciplinary teams. **Associate Professor Elizabeth Harris** (Director of CHETRE – the Centre for Health Equity Training, Research and Evaluation - at the University of New South Wales Research Centre for Primary Health Care & Equity) made a presentation on “Getting Equity on the Policy Agenda”. She reflected on how the NSW Department of Health’s Health & Equity Statement had been implemented in practice (health.nsw.gov.au/pubs/2004/pdf/fairnessreport.pdf). She also noted that in seeking to reduce health inequities there was a need to look for evidence on the features of the problem, to see whether there is something that can be done to address it, whether this can be done in the real world, and whether it is feasible to attempt. A/Professor Harris has recently completed a project on Australian governments and health inequities with Dr Lareen Newman and Professor Fran Baum of AHIP. The work is summarised in a new journal article on “State, Territory & Federal Government responses to health inequities and the social determinants of health in Australia”, which is part of a bumper issue of the *Health Promotion Journal of Australia* (Dec 2006) on the social determinants of health (www.healthpromotion.org.au).