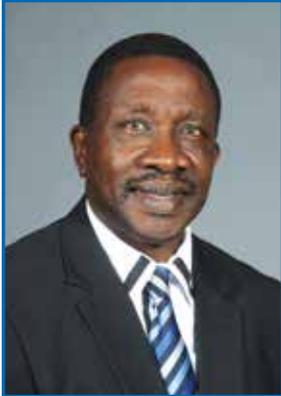


## EDITORIAL

### Social determinants of health: time for action



By the time, you receive this issue of the journal, the joint 5<sup>th</sup> WONCA Africa and 20<sup>th</sup> South African Academy of Family Physicians conference would have ended in Pretoria South Africa on 20 August 2017. The theme of the joint conference forms the basis of this editorial. So what is "Social Determinants of Health (SDH)"? The World Health Organization (WHO) defines it as the conditions

in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels. The SDH are mostly responsible for health inequities – the unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries. It is acknowledged that "health equity and social determinants" are critical components of the post-2015 sustainable development goals (SDG) global agenda and of the push towards progressive achievement of universal health coverage (UHC). If we have to reduce health inequities, the approach will be to address both SDH and UHC in an integrated and systematic manner.<sup>1</sup>

In October 2011, member states adopted the Rio Political Declaration at the World Conference on Social Determinants of Health in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The Rio declaration called for action in five main areas namely<sup>1</sup>:

- Adopt improved governance for health and development;
- Promote participation in policy-making and implementation;
- Further re-orient the health sector towards promoting health and reducing health inequities;
- Strengthen global governance and collaboration; and
- Monitor progress and increase accountability.

In May 2012, WHO Member States at the Sixty-fifth World Health Assembly (WHA) in Geneva, Switzerland endorsed the Rio Political Declaration. However, it is imperative to assess the progress since the 2010 Rio Political Declaration on SDH. The 2015 WHO Progress Report presented at the Sixty-eighth World Health Assembly dated 24 April 2014 lists a number of initiatives that have addressed the SDH agenda. These include the following which I consider relevant to Africa<sup>2</sup>:

- In 2013, the Regional Office for Africa published the strategy, 'Health promotion: strategy for the African Region', which

- included a strong emphasis on health in all policies.
- WHO advanced a methodology to support national health programmes to improve equity results (drawing from the fields of social determinants, gender and human rights).
- In 2014, the Regional Office for Africa established a technical group to support work on social determinants and conducted health equity analyses in four Small Island States.
- Progress was made by WHO in addressing equity, social determinants, gender and human rights through its work involving normative guideline development processes, including the Guidelines Review Committee.
- Led by WHO and UNICEF, 'Every newborn: an action plan to end preventable deaths' was published in 2014, and has a strong focus on equity and determinants.

Despite WHO progress on SDH activities in various Member States, the impact of the Rio Declaration is yet to be felt within the various Member States' health systems. In 2014, Mayosi BM and Benatar SR published an article in the New England Journal of Medicine titled 'Health and Health Care in South Africa — 20 Years after Mandela'. They concluded that, "Much of the hope for narrowing disparities in the new South Africa was embedded in the reversal of legislated racial discrimination generally and in aspirations for more equitable provision of health care specifically. But this places too much emphasis on legislation and biomedicine as the dominant routes to improved health, without consideration of the social determinants of health and the complexity associated with the effective practical application of new laws and health services"<sup>3</sup> So what has changed for the majority of the South African people with regards to the implementation of the SDH goals? This will be unpacked in the next editorial.

*Food for thought!*

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Editor-in-chief: SAFPJ

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