

TV Looks at Unnatural Causes to Health Disparities

By Federal D. Glover

Contra Costa County's Health Services is embarking on an ambitious campaign that potentially could alter the way we address health problems that face us.

Even though the United States spends more money per person for health care, why do almost all other industrialized countries outdo us in the infant mortality rate and life expectancy?

Closer to home, we should be comforted by the 2007 Community Health Indicators for Contra Costa report which shows that Contra Costa residents have lower rates of heart disease deaths, diabetes and teen births and STD cases. However, why are Contra Costa residents have a higher rate of cancer deaths, stroke deaths and cancer cases than the rest of California? And why is there a greater incidence of asthma in Pittsburg and Antioch and West County but relatively fewer cases in Central and the southern part of our County? These questions beg for answers.

The new campaign got its public launch with a seven-part series for PBS called "Unnatural Causes – Is Inequality Making Us Sick?" which began airing March 27. on Channel 9 and will continue for three more episodes every Wednesday at 10 p.m.

The series, which will also be available on DVD, is a medical detective story out to solve the mystery of what's staking and killing us before our time, especially those of us who are less well off.

The series delves beyond the traditional health indicators of what we eat, how much we exercise and our emotional state and examines the societal and government policies that affect our health.

For instance, in the first half of the 20th century the demand for water from the booming cities in the southwest including Los Angeles caused government and water agencies to divert the rivers for urban needs. The American Indians who depended on the water to sustain their crops had their farmlands dry up. Game, seeking new water sources, disappeared. To feed the starving reservation residents, the federal government trucked in excess commodities to help feed the Indians. But what did they bring in? Lard, white flour, butter.

So the Indians had to create new dishes using these food stuffs. Unfortunately, today these foods – unhealthy as they are -- are viewed as part of the "cultural" legacy of the American Indians. But because they shifted from their traditional staples of game, corn,

beans and squash, the new diet of processed foods have led to a higher rate of malnutrition, diabetes and obesity among Native Americans.

Policies do change lifestyles that in turn affect health.

The medical researchers and healthcare workers in the PBS series keep broadening their probe beyond immediate, physical causes of death to the underlying causes that lurk in our neighborhoods, our jobs and even historical reasons. The perpetrators, of course, aren't individuals but rather social and institutional forces. And these are not the crimes of passion that we read about in the newspaper. These are slow deaths -- the result of a lifetime of grinding wear and tear, thwarted ambition, segregation and neglect.

Health Services' campaign, spearheaded by former Bay Point Health Clinic director Connie James, hopes to reframe the way we look at health and what we as a society can - and should - do to reduce our alarming health disparities. West County, Central County and East County individuals are planning events to educate community leaders and policy makers to look beyond medical cures for better health and to consider nontraditional solutions to improving our health: investing in our schools, improving housing, designing walkable neighborhoods, creating living wage jobs and promoting equitable economic policies.

The 4-part series and the county campaign is not all gloom and doom. It is also a story of hope and possibility. It tells of communities organizing to gain control over their destinies - and their health. The good news is that if our bad health results in part from policy decisions that we have made as a society, then we can also make new policies that will improve our health. Some have already done that. So can we.

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