

General election 2011:

Social inequity and the importance of engaging in political dialogue

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In this post-exam malaise that most medical students are experiencing right now, we can sometimes forget about the wider world around us; but some events are too big to ignore and the upcoming general election falls into this category. Whether or not you actively engage in New Zealand politics, come election time it is almost impossible to avoid. Why should we care about the elections, and for that matter, politics in general? As future health professionals the policies that the incoming Government decides upon will have a major impact on the health and wellbeing of the patients we will care for and alters the way health resources are distributed.

Health is often a major issue around election time and the general population is always keen to know what different political parties will do to improve the healthcare system. Political parties of various persuasions have all been guilty of engaging in emotional politics such as promising to fund certain drug therapies or extra operations. Additionally, policies that some may perceive as impinging on an individual's rights are often dropped because of fears of voter backlash – for instance healthy eating policies in schools or raising the alcohol purchasing age. Yet any health professional can tell you that such policies, when implemented successfully, have the potential to generate millions of dollars of savings for the taxpayer.

The different health policies that political parties put forward have had a significant impact on the landscape of the New Zealand health system and this has affected both medical professionals and the general population that they serve. The New Zealand Medical Student Journal approached all the major political parties to write about their various health policies, and you can read what their responses were on page 20 and onwards. Nevertheless in these tough economic times it is becoming increasingly clear that with finite resources and an ever increasing demand for services, there needs to be a fundamental shift in the way health services are delivered to New Zealanders. Politicians need to look beyond the short and medium term objectives and begin adopting a holistic long-term perspective.

When adopting a holistic perspective, it is clear that policies from education, welfare, justice, housing, transport et cetera can all have an impact on the health outcomes experienced by our patients. There is insurmountable evidence regarding the various social and economic factors that cause inequalities in health outcomes. Hence, we all need to be well-informed of the stands of different parties on all the different issues that will affect the patients we aim to serve.

Professor Sir Michael Marmot, Chair of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health at the World Health Organization, recently led a

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review of what needs to be done to address health inequities. The review formulated six strategies that have been found to be effective based on the evidence. The underlying theme of these strategies is proportionate universalism; that is, the focus should be on lifting everyone up so that everyone has a chance at living a healthy life. These strategies are:

- Give every child the best start in life
- Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives
- Create fair employment and good work for all
- Ensure healthy standard of living for all
- Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities
- Strengthen the role and impact of ill health prevention

As future doctors, we can help by intervening with the individual patients. However we are in a unique position to do much more. We can also use the evidence and the influence our position grants us to have a positive impact on health inequalities. We can advocate on behalf of our patients to political parties and other funding bodies. To do this, we need to also make ourselves aware and informed of the various non-medical factors that can play a part in health outcomes. When deciding who to give your vote to this election, take these strategies into consideration and think further about how the policies the parties proffer fit with the type of society you want to see.

Regardless of your political leanings it is vital that you participate in the upcoming general election. Commentators on both sides of the political spectrum have called this year's general election to be a critical point in defining New Zealand's near future. Up to a quarter of people under 25 years of age are not enrolled to vote. We need to be active agents in our society, as the effects of the policies the upcoming Government formulates will be felt as we are starting in our profession.

We hope you find this issue of New Zealand Medical Student Journal thought-provoking. We are keen to hear your thoughts on the issues that matter to you the most. We welcome your letters to the editor, academic and feature articles, case reports, elective reports and book reviews. We trust you have an enjoyable summer.