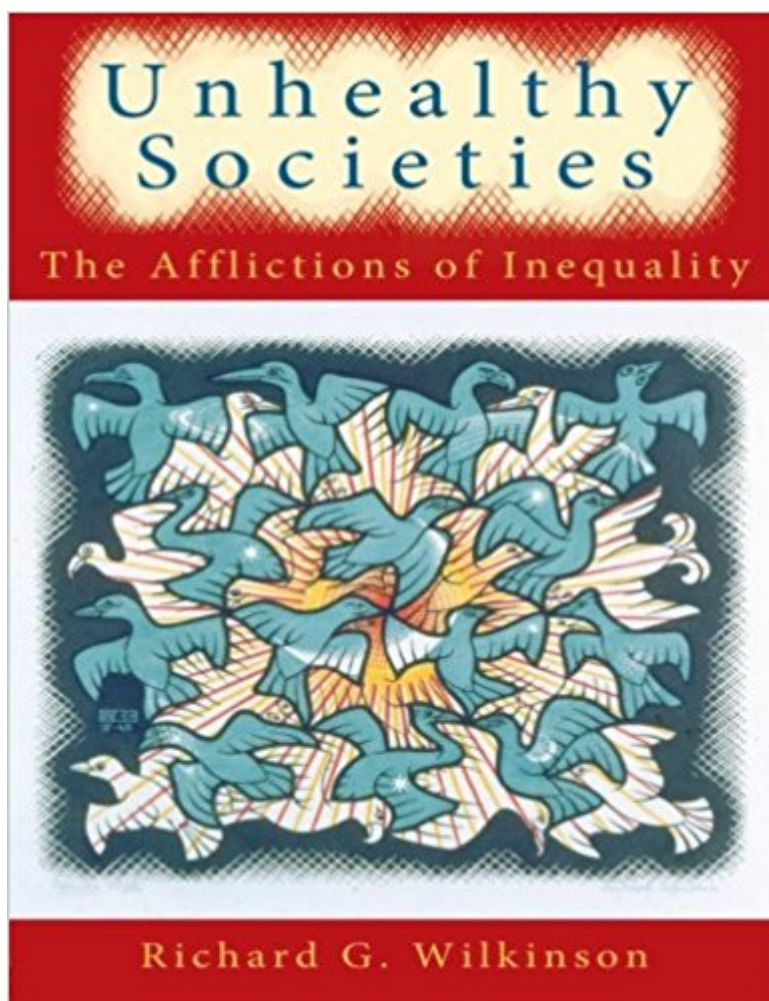


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Unhealthy Societies: The Afflictions Of Inequality



Synopsis

Among the developed countries it is not the richest societies which have the best health, but those which have the smallest income differences between rich and poor. Inequality and relative poverty have absolute effects: they increase death rates. But why? How can smaller income differences raise average life expectancy? Using examples from the USA, Britain, Japan and Eastern Europe, and bringing together evidence from the social and medical sciences, *Unhealthy Societies* provides the explanation. Healthy, egalitarian societies are more socially cohesive. They have a stronger community life and suffer fewer of the corrosive effects of inequality. As well as inequality weakening the social fabric, damaging health and increasing crime rates, *Unhealthy Societies* shows that social cohesion is crucial to the quality of life. The contrast between the material success and social failure of modern societies marks an imbalance which needs attention. The relationship between health and equality suggests that important social needs will go unmet without a larger measure of social and distributive justice. This path-breaking book is essential reading for health psychologists, sociologists, welfare economists, social policy analysts and all those concerned with the future of developed societies.

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Customer Reviews

'Unhealthy Societies is much more than another book on inequalities in health - it provides an elegantly argued treatise on the problems facing contemporary societies ... It is a methodologically sophisticated, yet inherently readable book ... This scholarly and insightful book is recommended reading for all students of sociology and economics, as well as health policy-makers and politicians.'

- Times Higher Educational Supplement 'Essential reading for medical sociologists, it is thought provoking, stimulating and accessible.' - Medical Sociology News 'For those interested in a saner, fairer, safer and healthier society, Richard Wilkinson's book, which merits more than one reading, is potentially epoch-making...sane, humane, compelling counter-arguments to Thatcherism and the 'me, now, society'.' - 'For those interested in a saner, fairer, safer and healthier society, Richard Wilkinson's book, which merits more than one reading, is potentially epoch-making...sane, humane, compelling counter-arguments to Thatcherism and the 'me, now, society'.' 'Fascinating ... it is impossible not to be impressed by the sheer scale of the enterprise undertaken by Richard Wilkinson, both in the magnitude of the question addressed and the extraordinary diversity of evidence he brings to bear on the issue ... a work of major significance.' - Sociology of Health and Illness 'One of the key social scientific texts of the decade ... a treasure trove of useful information, especially about the major consequences of income disparity in a community or society. Politicians, physicians and social scientists should somehow be required to read it and tested for comprehension ... should be required in every professional and social science educational programme. Its impact will be profound for years to come ... the importance of this book cannot be overstated.' - Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology 'Unhealthy Societies is a challenging and refreshing book. By looking at health from a quality of life rather than a strictly medical angle it enables readers to examine health in its broadest and most intricate social context.'

- Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths Newsletter 'The message of this book is exactly what the country needs to hear ... an engaging passionate work of social responsibility ... a timely and exciting book.'

- The Friend 'I have no hesitation in recommending this book to those working and training in public health, especially those with an interest in the psycho-social causes of illness.'

- Professor David R Phillips, in the Journal of Public Health Medicine

Richard G. Wilkinson is Senior Research Fellow at The Trafford Centre for Medical Research, University of Sussex.

Unhealthy Societies - the new, new pediatrics
Unhealthy Societies: The Afflictions of Inequality, by Richard Wilkinson, is a clear, multifaceted description of research into the patterns of disease, violence, and death between and within societies. Wilkinson reviews the global patterns of disease and death historically, where the trend is down. Countries which have attained a modest degree of affluence have gone through the 'epidemiological transition' where the primary causes of death are no longer infectious, but the 'diseases of affluence' the degenerative diseases He then reviews

changes between societies, showing that some have large divergence in death rates as a function of income and that others do not. The difference is a function of the spread of income within the society. This pattern applies to the states of the US as well as among nations. . Above a certain level, the prime factors which determine health are relative, not absolute income. He then cites data on the differences in death rates within societies as a function of income. For example, British civil servants in the lowest income categories have 4 times the rate of death from heart disease as those in the highest income categories. This pattern is shown to apply to homicides, and reading failure as well as a large number of medical conditions. Another chapter deals with the level of cooperation in human societies in prehistory, versus the atomization and Hobbesian conflict, which is seen as normal and inevitable today. He also reviews studies which show that much of what we call human nature has been shown to be inference from our own behavior and is very sensitive to changes in situation. He then looks at the societies beyond the epidemiological transition and inquires into the mechanisms by which the poorer folks in society might be afflicted with disease. He concludes that it is due to psychosocial factors and particularly chronic stress. That the lower you go in society, the more fear you have of unemployment and destitution. Also you have less space to live in, less education, and are surrounded by more stressed people. Stressed people have lower self-esteem and for instance are much less likely to be able to give up smoking. Short-term pleasures, such as comfort foods, become harder to refuse. He also relates some studies about the correlations between family discord in childhood and adult health problems, and depression in mothers and children's accident rates. "To feel depressed, cheated, bitter, desperate, vulnerable, frightened, angry, worried about debts or job and housing insecurity; to feel devalued, useless, helpless, uncared for, hopeless, isolated, anxious and a failure: these feelings can dominate people's whole experience of life, colouring their experience of everything else. It is the chronic stress arising from feelings like these which does the damage." Wilkinson points out with classic British understatement - "If the aim is to improve the welfare [health] of populations, it would be unwise to try to treat the psychosocial symptoms without reducing the underlying scale of relative deprivation." Recovering his voice he adds: "As the powerful logic of the market extends its tentacles ever wider, it is easy to think of economics as a mental illness which leads to the perception of all human behavior as springing from an egotistical desire to maximize consumption." "The public sphere in [healthy and egalitarian] societies seem to be incorporated in social life rather than being abandoned to the negative market relations between self-interested households". Turning to solutions, he points out that "To want continuous growth in order so solve problems of [unemployment, income insecurity and increased profits] is merely a form of addiction: during the economic highs the problems are

temporarily solved only to return in the next recession. The problems which the economic upturns seem to solve need a more fundamental and durable solution which would hold even in the absence of growth." "If we could use a dose of egalitarianism to turn the idea of civilisation into an inclusive rather than an exclusive concept, we would perhaps have an idea of the social conditions for health." "Rather than relying on providing more special needs classes in schools, more prisons and police, more social workers and health services, more counsellors and therapists, we have to tackle at root some of the main causes of the problems with which they attempt to cope. Even if we could afford vast armies of counsellors and community development workers with a small team for every street, there is no reason to think that it is possible to separate the structural causes from their social symptoms." Wilkinson concludes with: "Action does not depend simply on a sense of altruistic concern for the welfare of a minority. The majority cannot enjoy life oblivious to these problems: they affect the quality of life for all of us." This is a brilliant book, pulling together much data which illuminates the causes of the diseases we experience in our everyday lives. Pediatricians in particular see this and when we are not moralizing, wonder why it is. Wilkinson shows that an egalitarian society where people see each other as partners rather than opponents, as interdependent rather than independent, is healthier and generally wealthier. Much ink has been used in the last 25 years to talk about the 'new' pediatrics. Many pediatricians have expanded their practices beyond the organic diseases to look into the individual stresses and dysfunctions of families seeing them as factors contributing to the diseases we see in our patients. What Wilkinson does is to look beyond the individual stresses to the social stresses. He takes a public health view of stress disease and how it affects us all. In my opinion pediatricians should add this dimension to their work with families and in society. We fail our professional duty if we ignore these pathogens as outside our purview. Karl W. Hess, M.D., FAAP

Unhealthy Societies is a terribly ambitious book. Only superficially is it about public health...really, what Wilkinson is trying to get at is something altogether more profound, he goes for the age old philosophical questions on what makes a society good and decent and just. Wilkinson bites off a heck of a lot, and chews it masterfully. Wilkinson defends his thesis with a mountain of empirical evidence and not a little bit of style. His gift for elegant and persuasive prose makes his complex reasoning seem simple, almost commonsensical. The end result is a truly refreshing rationale for a sort of democratic socialism, one that is neither dogmatic nor ideological, but rather is based on social fact, in the Durkheimian sense. In Richard Wilkinson we have a rare gift: a social scientist who is careful with his evidence yet is not afraid to take on truly transcendental questions. It's a shame

his research isn't more widely read and cited.

This book is 21 years old now but still worth reading. Wilkinson is a major analyst in this field and a great asset to the social activist side of academia. It is excellent scholarship and valuable argument for equal opportunity and social justice. Even conservatives should be able to understand that. Midwest Independent Research, educational websites. Equal opportunity, mwir-equalopportunity.blogspot. There is a book list.

In *Unhealthy Societies: the Afflictions of Inequality*, Richard Wilkinson lays down the gauntlet to all those who profess to be concerned about the health of societies and those who live in these societies. He carefully outlines the research that indicates that it is not the wealth of nations that determines health, but rather how this wealth is distributed. He also describes the processes by which economic inequality becomes translated into societal malaise and societal disintegration. Using many examples from the United States and the United Kingdom, he documents that states and areas that have relatively greater inequality of wealth show greater signs of societal disintegration involving higher crime rates, poorer health, and greater incidence of violence. *Unhealthy Societies: the Afflictions of Inequality* suggests that health education and health promotion approaches that ignore broader social issues are doomed to failure. He also suggests that societies that ignore these issues are also destined for increased malaise. The book should be required reading for health workers, policy and welfare analysts, and government officials and politicians. It should be especially useful as a text in the health and social sciences.

It is not the wealth in America that matters for health, quality of life and wise thinking. What matters in a blessed society is how the wealth is distributed. Even in a very wealthy country as in America, uneven and idiotic distribution of the wealth is leading to corruption of CEOs and large corporations, disintegration of health care delivery, and unbelievable amounts of misery in families where husband and wife have to both work to survive. It used to be that one spouse worked outside the home and the other spouse worked inside the home available for the raising of children. With all of the wealth in America, the healthcare delivery system is one of the most inefficient and corrupt delivery systems one could even imagine. Without good preventive and curative healthcare for Americans the country will fail and it will be a completely avoidable tragedy caused by raw greed. By far the number one priority for America should be quality healthcare for all Americans not based on social standing, who you know, or the money in your bank account.

This is just typical of the "Me, Me, Me" society who wants everyone to support them instead of taking responsibility for their own lives. See my review of "Uninsured in America: Life & Death in the Land of Opportunity" for more details.

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