

Doctors Point to Poverty as Major Cause of Illness

New report shows how poverty impacts health and what doctors can do to help address this growing health-care crisis

TORONTO, July 29 /CNW/ - A new report by a group of Ontario doctors highlights the ways in which poverty affects the health outcomes of adults and children and the role health-care professionals can play in reducing the impact of poverty on people's health. The report, "Why poverty makes us sick," authored by The Ontario Physicians Poverty Work Group, reveals that poverty substantially raises the rate of chronic illness, infant mortality and lowers life expectancy.

"As doctors, we are concerned with the widespread impact that poverty has on people's health," said Dr. Gary Bloch, a family doctor and member of the Ontario Physicians Poverty Work Group. "Demographic trends show that poverty is now a key indicator for health status when we treat our patients, which is why doctors are highlighting how poverty can affect us and what patients need to do to minimize the negative impact."

One of the most dramatic conclusions in the report is that poverty is likely the most important determinant of illness and early mortality. Research shows the startling impact that low-income can have on a person's health status. For example, low-income Ontario women are nearly four times more likely to suffer from diabetes than high-income women, and the prevalence of depression among low-income individuals is 60 percent higher than the Canadian average.

The Ontario Physicians Poverty Work Group, which is made up of Medical Officers of Health and physicians who specialize in family medicine, is raising awareness about the role health-care providers can play in treating patients from lower socio-economic backgrounds and the need to have a province-wide plan to address poverty.

"The faces of poverty are often hidden to physicians, but there are ways to understand how patients are living and their level of risk for illnesses associated with poverty," said Dr. Itamar Tamari, member of the Ontario Physicians Poverty Work Group. "Doctors are working hard to ensure this part of the patient population does not go untreated, but tackling poverty must be a coordinated effort including governments and communities."

In 2007, the Ontario provincial government pledged to tackle poverty in their election platform. According to the Ontario Physicians Poverty Work Group, health-care professionals look forward to working with the government to address the negative impact of poverty on health.

The report provides practical clinical advice to physicians such as becoming aware of different population groups in the community so that appropriate preventative steps and education are provided to patients. The report also suggests that doctors can encourage patients to apply for government support programs and advocate for their patients by preparing letters of support.

"In order to address the problem of poverty we need strong leaders. Doctors can fulfill that role by advocating for better care for their patients," said Dr. Michael Rachlis, member of the Ontario Physicians Poverty Work Group. "It is our hope that the provincial government will work with health-care providers in the fight against poverty and the preventable illnesses that it is responsible for."