Health Care Inequities in America

Class Description:

In this student-led seminar, we hope to give a broad perspective on a multitude of issues relating to health care access in America today. The class will emphasize the social component of health and examine health care disparities in light of social, cultural, economic, ethnic and political factors. The facilitators hope to provide a broad understanding of health issues for students who may have limited knowledge or experience. The class will also emphasize how individuals are communities are impacted by such health care disparities, focusing on the more “human side” of public health, looking beyond solely statistical data. Using both analytical studies and personal narratives, the coursework will examine the impact of various health issues and outcomes on a quantitative and qualitative level. The class will conclude with future projections and how the health access disparities can be improved in America, considering economic, political and socio-cultural factors.

The class will meet once a week at a location on campus, and will last 2-3 hours. Class leaders will facilitate discussion and utilize relevant films, when appropriate. The co-facilitators will also recruit guest speakers to lecture and answer question on their area of expertise. The guest speakers will most likely be NU professors or local professionals in the field.

The facilitators also hope to include a volunteer experience component to the class, which would expose students to ongoing work and challenges of local organizations that address health disparities in Chicago.

The class will culminate in a spring break trip to an undetermined location, most likely New York City or Boston. The students and co-facilitators will volunteer at one or multiple locations for one week and will gain first-hand experience of the issues studied in ASB: “The Class” during the past 10 weeks.

Evaluation:

Students will be expected to keep up to date about public health issues in accredited media outlets, specifically the New York Times, Chicago Tribune and Washington Post, among other reliable sources. Students will choose a health care disparity topic of their choosing and will write a 4-6 page paper, including a detailed bibliography. Each student will present his or her project for the last class. Presentations should last approximately 10 minutes and students are encouraged to utilize PowerPoint.
Tentative Class Schedule:

**Week 1: Introduction - The US Healthcare System and the Social Component of Health**
The first class will provide a basic overview of the US healthcare system, including the general concepts of insurance, Medicare, Medicaid, and the public/private divide, among other topics. The class will also include how the US system compares to the health care systems of other countries with similar GDP, the concept of “universal healthcare” and possible reasons why it doesn’t exist in America. The co-facilitators will emphasize the social component of health and pose various questions that the class will address in the following 9 weeks.

**WEEK 1 READING:**
  - (Medical Measure and the Decline of Mortality - Mckinlay & McKinlay pg 7-19)
  - (Social Class, Susceptibility and Sickness - Syme & Berkman - pg 24-30)
  - (Excess Mortality in Harlem - McCord and Freeman - pg 30-37)
  - (Health Inequalities: Relative or Absolute Material Standards? Wilkinson - pg 98-103)
  - (The US Health Care System - Fry et al - pgs 234-243)

**Week 2: Community Health and Prevention, Promotion and Treatment**
This class will focus on community-based healthcare options and the merits and challenges of such an approach. We will also examine the tension between prevention/promotion and treatment, and the social and economic outcomes, for individuals and the health care system more broadly. We will focus specifically on such topics as child immunizations, mammograms, “lifestyle” counseling and advice, pap smears, colonoscopies, and other issues related to primary care and annual or semi-annual “check-ups.”

**WEEK 2 READING:**
- Politicizing Health Care - McKnight - 469-472
- A Case for refocusing upstream: the political economy of illness - McKinlay - 551-564

**Week 3: Barriers to Health: External Factors**
This week will examine the barriers many Americans encounter in accessing healthcare. We will focus specifically on barriers that exist outside of the clinic, hospital, etc. Such issues as lack of secured housing, transportation, money, and job flexibility, among other factors, contribute to health care disparities.
WEEK 3 READINGS:
  http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/050829fa_fact

Week 4: Chronic Illness and “Lifestyle” Health Issues
This class will examine numerous chronic health problems in America, including various cancers, diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and other health problems that may be linked to obesity. We will examine the problematic notion of holding the patient completely responsible for his or her “lifestyle” and health needs, and we will consider various forces that inhibit one’s ability to live a “healthy lifestyle.” These forces, usually exacerbated by poverty, include lack of fresh produce and unrefined foods with acceptable levels of sugar and fats, and the rigorous marketing of the corporate food industry, and the government responsibility for its regulation.

WEEK 5 READINGS:

Week 5: Barriers to Health: Doctor-Patient Relations
We will focus on the barriers to optimal health care access that exist inside the hospital or doctor’s office. These factors include, but are not limited to, language and cultural barriers, the problematic notion of “noncompliance” and other misunderstandings often stemming from problematic doctor-patient relationships.

WEEK 4 READINGS:
  ○ (Social Death as Self-Fulfilling Prophecy- Timmermans- pgs 331-347)
- Hippocratic Oath. See related materials:
  http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/doctors/oath_today.html


FILM #1: Community Voices, 2001, 69 mins

FILM #2: Worlds Apart, 2003, 49 mins, 306.46101 W927 vhs, View one vignette

---

**Week 6: HIV/AIDS and Other Sexual Health Issues**

We will focus this week on sexual health issues in America, with specific attention to HIV/AIDS and the numerous health disparities it reveals and intensifies. We will also discuss topics related to family planning, teenage pregnancy, and access to contraception and abortion services.

**WEEK 6 READING:**

  - (AIDS and Stigma- Herek- pgs 121-129)
  - (AIDS and its impact on medical work: the culture and politics of the shop floor- Bosk & Frader- pgs 253- 265)
  - Chesney, Margaret 2003 Adherence to HAART Regimens. AIDS Patient Care and STDs 17, 4:169-177.

- Hill, Z. et al 2003 Patterns of Adherence to Antiretrovirals: Why Adherence Has No Simple Measure. AIDS Patient Care and STDs 17, 10:519-525

- Smith, K. et al 2003 Optimizing Care for African-American HIV-Positive Patients. AIDS Patient Care and STDs 17, 10:519-


---

**Week 7: “Mental Illness”**

This class will address the varied possibilities of mental illness, what it means to be “mentally ill” and how such individuals can or cannot access proper treatment. We will specifically look at
depression and other mental disorders that are not always clearly diagnosable and treatable, and problems relating to overmedication and a lack of psychiatric counseling services. We will also discuss the larger context in which substance abuse, in the forms of alcohol, various drugs and prescription drugs, exists.

WEEK 7 READINGS:
- E. Jane Costello, PhD; Scott N. Compton, PhD; Gordon Keeler, MS; Adrian Angold, MRCPsych. Relationships Between Poverty and Psychopathology: A Natural Experiment JAMA. 2003;290:2023-2029.

---

Week 8: Geriatric Care
We will look at the enormous demographic of elderly persons that is emerging in the coming decades, and how Medicare, government spending, and the privatization of insurance is involved in that process. We will also address health issues specifically relevant to the elderly, such as Alzheimer’s Disease, certain cancers, and other health issues. What is the future of care for elderly persons? We will also look at how other countries or cultures care for their elderly citizens and what we might learn from them.

WEEK 8 READINGS:
  ○ (Dying Alone: The Social Production of Urban Isolation- Klinenberg- 83-97)

---

Week 9: Reform Possibilities and Other Future Concerns
What is the future of healthcare disparities in America? Based on previous coursework, we will suggest various options, beyond the popular notion of “universal healthcare.” We will also consider what type of action and political climate is necessary to bring about such a change. What are the challenges? Students will also likely prepare an independent project, a topic of their own choosing, to present at the last class.
WEEK 9 READINGS:
  - A century of failure: health care reform in America- Rothman- 292-300
  - Rationing Medical Progress- Callahan- 458-461
  - The Trouble with Rationing- Relman- 462-464
  - Comparative Models of “Health Care” Systems- Light- 500-51

Tentative Guest Lecturers (possible weeks):

Professor Kearsley Stewart, PhD, Department of Anthropology (week 5, week 6)

Professor William Leonard, PhD, Director of Department of Anthropology and founder of Global Health Program at NU (week 2)

Heidi Nelson, Lecturer- SESP, teaches “Social Policy and the US Health Care System” (week 9)

Various leaders and health professionals from health care advocacy and provider groups in the Chicago area (TBA)