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Exploring the links between volunteering, health and inequalities – is this a public health issue?

Issue: Health 2020 envisions a critical role for civil society and volunteerism is an important facet of this. As well as the volunteer contribution to community health, volunteering is associated with intrinsic health benefits. This makes it a public health issue but little attention is given to the question of how volunteering intersects with health inequalities.

Description of problem: This presentation reports on a UK project that is seeking to maximise the public health potential of volunteering and address barriers that result in unequal access. Because little is known about this issue beyond the variations that exist, the first stage was a rapid scoping review conducted in 2015-6. This involved reviewing key literature on health inequalities and volunteering across socio-economic status and the nine population groups protected by the UK Equality Act.

Results: The scoping review identified 6,094 publications and after screening, 98 studies were reviewed; of these were 24 UK and 18 from elsewhere in Europe. Results confirmed that volunteering is associated with a social gradient, with disadvantaged groups less likely to volunteer. A web of factors were found to influence volunteering prevalence, however barriers varied between groups and across the lifecourse. The review also uncovered issues of stigma affecting people with disabilities.

Lessons: The review provides a map of inequalities issues that affect volunteering, which given the focus of Europe 2020 will be of use to public health policy and practice. The next stage is to identify interventions that are able to widen participation and address social exclusion. Our conclusions are that volunteering should be recognised as a public health issue. More debate is needed on how public health systems can respond to the inequalities identified and enable those who face barriers to gain from the health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering.

Main messages

Volunteering needs to be considered as a public health issue, with more potential for addressing social exclusion and health inequalities

Multiple factors influence inequalities in access to volunteering, with different population groups experiencing different barriers