Social Conditions and Health

Harsh times lead us to reflect on our values and seek inspiration from revered figures. Italian neurologist and senator-for-life Rita Levi Montalcini celebrated her 100th birthday on April 22, 2009. In 1986, she received the Nobel Prize for Medicine with Stanley Cohen of the United States for discoveries of mechanisms that regulate cell and organ growth. Word of her long life and well-being was refreshing to read at a time when most news reports concern the mortgage crisis and bleak economic outlook. While stories of profound hardship for people around the globe take a toll on all of us, I am personally affected by fears of what the future will hold for my young daughter. The term “new needy” has been coined to denote households that are traditionally only utilized by the chronically homeless. These measures that are responsible for most of the health disparities witnessed worldwide. Just as families lose their homes, belongings, and each other. In some places around the globe, economic upheaval has affected entire neighborhoods, communities, and towns, for financial deprivation affects the health of not only people who lose their homes, but also those who remain behind. Some have opted to forgo payments for health insurance, essential health care, or prescriptions to pay for rent, food, and gas. The toll of these sacrifices will eventually become manifest on population health, as many lack the support and resources to engage in health-promoting behaviors such as eating nutritious foods and receiving preventive health care.

As Nancy Kass put it in her 2001 journal piece, “The most important asset that public health can have is the public’s trust that work is being done on its own behalf. In such a context, public health professionals can and must advocate what they believe, on balance, are the ethically best approaches for furthering social justice and the public’s health” (Kass NE. An ethics framework for public health. Am J Public Health. 2001;91:1782). As her 100th birthday day drew near, Montalcini recounted in a Huffington Post interview how the anti-Jewish laws of the 1930s under Mussolini’s Fascist regime forced her to quit school and do research in her bedroom. “Above all, don’t fear difficult moments,” she advised. “The best comes from them” (von Pfetten V. Rita Levi Montalcini, Nobel Prize-winning scientist turns 100, still works. Huffington Post. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/04/20/rita=levi=montalcini=noble_n_188935.html. Accessed April 18, 2009).