Evolving the Urban Health Agenda

David Vlahov

The International Conferences on Urban Health have worked to frame the agenda for disease prevention and health promotion in cities. Subsequent meetings have expanded a research perspective devoted primarily to gathering information, to one actively generating and testing interventions. Beyond this, the urban health agenda has recognized and incorporated the importance of the physical and social environment that differentially impacts health within neighborhoods inside metropolitan areas.

The first conference was held in Toronto, sponsored by St. Michael's Hospital, with health of inner city residents as the theme. The focus was on the description of the urban health penalty, whereby citizens within impoverished areas demonstrated worse health outcomes, higher risk behaviors, and less access to conventional health care even within universal health care systems. The meeting participants addressed the challenges and opportunities for preventive and therapeutic care with an emphasis on innovative and even provocative approaches. The approaches presented were primarily medical and public health, yet the seeds of interdisciplinary research strategies were germinating. By the end of the meeting, perspectives had been widened. Discussion ensued on goals and directions, including the focus on health in inner cities being expanded to consider how city living impacts all residents.

The second conference was held in New York City, hosted by the New York Academy of Medicine, and the theme was urban environmental exposures—including both physical and social components—that are affected by municipal, market, national, and international trends. Discussion considered the health of persons living in areas of concentrated disadvantage and the challenges of access to and provision of health care services. Presentations and ensuing dialogue also extended to considering the intersecting influences of neighborhoods, rich and poor, in urban and suburban areas. A broad framework was becoming articulated, and the challenge for researchers was not only to shape and fit the work from diverse fields to the framework but also to assess whether the emerging framework was meaningful for communicating across diverse fields and groups.

The third conference was held in Boston, hosted by Northeastern University, and the theme was global perspectives. The pace of immigration to urban areas in developing countries is outstripping resources that are needed to maintain health. The meeting addressed the opportunity for cross-fertilization of ideas, information, and approaches between countries in both developed and developing worlds.

This fourth conference subsumes the previous three conference agendas. Thus far, the meetings have moved from inner city to metropolitan area to international and global perspectives. This year's theme of social justice underpins and connects these earlier developments in urban health. The theme further reconciles a tension across the previous conferences that centered on the need for bringing together researchers with diverse backgrounds and community stakeholders to develop a

shared vocabulary for multilevel assessment, multi-component action and rigorous evaluation. These diverse interests can find common ground and joint purpose in pursuing social justice. Although researchers refine, practitioners improve, and stakeholders advance urban health, the shared vision of social justice unifies them in working toward the goal of health in cities for all.