Urbanization and Nature - Culture - Health Activities

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PROFESSIONAL PAPER
SUMMARY
This paper presents a new concept called "The NatureCultureHealth Interplay (NaCuHeal). The main aim of the concept is to promote health, environment and quality of life among all (1). The purpose is also to create a common arena and forum for wholeness thinking and creativity among participants. What is offered at this "agora", is nature-culture-health activities among people in the local community (2). One of the challenges is, however, to get various interest groups, i.e. public agencies, private businesses, voluntary organisations and pioneers to co-operate in order to develop the idea to be realised in health promoting settings (3). During the last 15 years, partnerships for health promotion and new and diverse networks have been created to achieve intersectoral collaboration in a local community (1,4). A center described below is now one of the official partners of public health in the county of Akershus as well as the municipality of Asker, 20 kilometers west of Oslo in Norway.

Key words: Health promotion, Public health, urbanization, inequalities and health, Nature-Culture,-Health Concept - NaCuHeal.

1. URBANISATION AND THE NEED FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

There is both a strong political and economic rationale for governments to invest more in community based public health research and practice. Urbanisation seems to lead to greater inequalities among population groups both within the urban areas as well as due to rural-urban differences (5). The shaping of health promoting settings at work, in hospitals, in schools and in local communities, therefore has been significantly supported by the World Health Organisation. Health promotion requires partnerships for health and social development between the different sectors at all levels of the community (6). New health challenges mean that new and diverse networks need to be created to achieve intersectoral collaboration. Such networks should provide mutual assistance within and between countries and facilitate exchange of information on which strategies are effective in which settings. Health promoting community building and participation through Nature-Culture-Health activities to increase peoples functional ability should be studied in future research.

Illness, disease and sickness have a major impact on the economic situation and well-being of an individual in any society. This is particularly true in the lower income regions of countries and big cities. Improvements in health may boost productivity and the individual’s level of income, capacity to acquire an education, and psychological well-being. There is therefore a strong both political and economic rationale for governments to invest more in public health research and practice (7). The Commission on Macroeconomics and Health, chaired by Professor Jeffrey Sachs of Harvard University, showed that disease is a drain on societies, and that investments in health can be a concrete input to economic development (8).

2. INEQUALITIES AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Nowadays, people in Europe live longer and lead healthier lifestyles than ever before. However this does not give grounds for complacency. One in five citizens still dies at early age, often due to preventable disease, and there are disturbing inequalities in health status between social classes and across geographical areas. Urbanisation is an on-going process, having a profound impact on people’s livelihood and health status. The globalisation of markets, increased use of communication and new information technologies are the driving forces behind this process. The urbanisation process has marked effects on the natural and cultural environment, on housing arrangements and social networks, as well as on work and employment patterns, not only in cities, but also in rural areas. Urbanisation seems to lead to greater inequalities among population groups in regard to distribution of risk factors to health, both within the urban areas as well as due to rural-urban differences. Access to health care, social services and cultural activities are generally often better in the cities, but usually access is not evenly distributed among the population.

3. SALUTOGENESIS AS A SUPPLEMENT TO PATHOGENESIS

These rapid processes of change represent a challenge to public health policy. Public health research and prac-
tice should focus not only on factors causing disease and injuries (pathogenesis), but also factors promoting health (salutogenesis) in the perspective of health promotion and prevention in different settings. Tomorrow's society will most probably focus more on that which strengthens health, namely the salutogenic (health causing) factors as described by Antonovsky (9,10). The shaping of health promoting settings at work, in hospitals, in schools and in local communities, therefore has been significantly supported by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

4. PARTNERSHIP, COMMUNITY CAPACITY AND EMPOWERMENT TO THE INDIVIDUALS

Health promotion requires partnerships for health and social development between the different sectors at all levels of the community (6). Existing partnerships need to be strengthened and the potential for new partnerships must be explored and evaluated. Partnerships are now used as a public health tool in some European countries.

Health promotion is carried out by and with people, not on or to people (6). It improves both the ability of individuals to take action, and the capacity of groups, organisations or communities to influence the determinants of health.

“Settings for health” represent the organisational base of the infrastructure required for health promotion (6). New health challenges mean that new and diverse networks need to be created to achieve intersectoral collaboration. Such networks should provide mutual assistance within and between countries and facilitate exchange of information on which strategies are effective in which settings.

5. EXPERIENCE WITH “COMMUNITY BUILDING“ BASED HEALTH PROMOTION

At the Centre for NatureCultureHealth (NaCuHeal) in Asker there have since 1994 been several experiments where individuals from the local population have been helped to find their own talents and capacity for work to maintain function and pleasure in work (4,11). At the NatureCultureHealth centre it is desirable with participation and positive interactions between persons of all ages, health status, philosophies and social positions. The idea is that such a meeting place between practitioners and theorists, between the presently well and the presently not so well, will be stimulating and enlightening to most people. Through participation in NatureCultureHealth groups the individual will find the opportunity to bring to life his or her own ideas by emphasizing positive and creative activities outside one self. At the same time, NaCuHeal-activities may nourish other sides of one's personality that may also need development, attention and strengthening, to prepare for community and new social networks. Persons with different health problems may forget their health related and social problems for a while.

A study interviewing 46 participants report that around 2/3 had improved their health status, quality of life and function, particularly when given opportunity to utilise their own abilities and creativity. Belonging to a themed group seems to play a significant role in increasing their self-efficacy and self-esteem. A majority of the participants reported improved health, quality of life and function to return-to-work due to their experiences in the NaCuHeal-groups (4).

6. THE NACUHEAL CONCEPT

The concept of NatureCultureHealth is based on the idea of stimulating to wholeness thinking and by emphasizing (11):

- Nature, out-door life, and environmental activities
- Culture, art, physical activity and stainable nutrition
- Health promotion, prevention and rehabilitation

The intention was to:

- Increase participants' own empowerment and participation in activities in relation to strengthening their own health, quality of life and function
- Create growth in social networks that are encouraging and stimulating
- Motivate to work ability and to explore ways of coping in day-to-day activities

The activities seem to strengthen the ability to cope, improve quality of life and enable us to meet everyday life in a positive manner. To encourage Nature-Culture-Health activities among other things means emphasizing the positive factors leading to health (salutogenesis). Health may in this context be defined as having as little illness as possible while having the energy to cope with the tasks and challenges of everyday life.

Many individuals have through different Nature-Culture-Health activities experienced that e.g. dance, music, art, physical activity, nature walks, hiking, gardening or contact with pets give an indirect effect with feelings of zest for life, inspiration and desire for rehabilitation. For many persons certified sick, this has been a method for return-to-work. The direct route through vocational rehabilitation may be of help to some people. For others, however, it may be necessary to take a more indirect and creative route to succeed in their rehabilitation, i.e. to practice and participate in NaCuHeal-activities for later to achieve a more useful and active existence. The way through such creative activities may give each individual a feeling of meaning and desire to act.

There is reason to believe that there is an untapped potential for improving public health by employing health-promoting nature and cultural activities. This is also a great challenge to our new multicultural and urban society. The goal is increased ability to cope, productivity and prosperity to all people, i.e. not only the affluent members of society, but also the ones who are in danger of becoming permanently incapable of working.

7. NEW CHALLENGES FOR PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFE COMMUNITY BUILDING

Since new health challenges mean that new and diverse networks—community building—need to be created to achieve intersectoral collaboration, new methods of public health research have to be developed. Synthetic research methods probably have to be applied in order to evaluate the community approach to public health used at NaCuHeal-centers.

The environment, culture and global health are in fast
transition today. The question is how to cope in a changing world for all of us. Our experience is that Nature-Culture-Health activities to some extent can help us to promote the Public’s health, environment and quality of life (4,12,13). But there is also still a great challenge to go on developing “Safe communities” worldwide (14).

REFERENCES


MIE2011

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