

Socioeconomic differences in health are substantial across Europe

Mortality is known to vary with socioeconomic level described by education, occupation and income. However, in Europe data about morbidity and health determinants are scarce. The lower the socioeconomic level the larger are the population group's morbidity rates. The first results of the ECHIM health monitoring project have now been analysed. For example, obesity, diabetes and depression are more common among low-skilled persons than among highly educated persons in Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and Austria.

It is not yet to say whether different diseases are more rampant in one European country than another. The data previously collected from different countries have been generated by varying methods and at different time, which complicates comparisons. Also there are no simple explanations for lower prevalence of asthma, chronic pulmonary disease or hypertension, which varied in Estonia, France and Italy, which can only be obtained by more in depth analyses.

"However, the variation by socioeconomic group was large and consistent. Lower socioeconomic level was also associated with higher disease prevalence in all countries", emphasizes Professor Arpo Aromaa, the leader of ECHIM project. Since lower educational levels are more common among older people it is important to take into account socioeconomic level, age and cohort effect.

Still, according to Aromaa, it is quite evident that in Europe, education, for example is more important in determining the number of years in good health than our nationality or the country we live in. "First interpretation is that health in all countries would be greatly improved by reducing the socioeconomic variation in the common determinants of chronic diseases."

ECHIM, The Joint Action for Health Information and Monitoring, has defined 88 key indicators to compare health in various European countries. Using these indicators, ECHIM has now produced the first ever comparative findings based on the collation of European Health Interview Survey data together with a number of EU Member States. The intention is to proceed with the collection of comparative data and in depth analyses.

Please visit the ECHIM website (www.echim.org) to keep informed!

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Depressive disorders within the past 12 months by educational level

