

Social class inequalities in death rates

INCREASING inequality between social classes in male life expectancy has been highlighted in an HRC-funded study headed by Professor Neil Pearce, Director of the Centre for Public Health Research at Massey University's Wellington campus.

He says that while New Zealand's death rate continues to decline, the social class differences in death rates have increased slightly.

Between 1975 and 1977 the death rate for the least advantaged groups was 1.8 times that of the most advantaged, but the ratio grew to 2.1 in 1985-87 and 2.3 in 1995-97.

Professor Pearce says the studies cover a particularly interesting time in New Zealand history and show the health effects of a period when the country has reduced the role of the welfare state.

The study also involves Professor Peter Davis and Andrew Sporle who analysed the data separately for Maori and non-Maori and found the social class mortality differences within Maori were markedly greater than for non-Maori.

Professor Pearce has also been looking at amenable causes of death (causes that the health services can do something about) and comparing them with non-amenable causes.

"We know in general that the high Maori death rates particularly apply to amenable causes, which reflects a failing in the health system. The social class differences in general mainly relate to causes that can't be cured by the health system, such as smoking related diseases, car accidents and general environmental factors."

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By Mark Wright



Professor Neil Pearce

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