

## **NZ infectious disease rate an international embarrassment**

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I am on leave in UK and was recently listening to an excellent BBC radio programme called *One Planet*. This particular morning the show featured an item on New Zealand having had a 50 percent increase in preventable infectious diseases in the last few decades. In just about every other country these diseases are declining.

I listened in horror as Kiwi paediatrician Cameron Grant from Starship Children's Hospital told the entire world this is not something you'd expect from a developed country.

Auckland paediatrician Diana Lennon was also interviewed. She described our preventable infectious disease rate as being both a "brown versus white" and a "rich versus poor" issue. She said Māori and Pacific people are twice as likely to end up in hospital with these conditions, and that about a third of our population still carry these old fashioned diseases.

She went on to say that New Zealand needs to address this as a moral issue, but that to do so would also make sense economically. Obviously these infectious diseases transmit between people, increasing the risk for everyone, but they also fill up our hospitals – two thirds of all admissions for children under five are for infectious diseases – and we all foot the bill for that.

Lennon cited recommendations made by Michael Baker, a leading public health researcher, in a recently published *Lancet* article. He says if New Zealand is going to combat the sudden rise in preventable infectious diseases, then we need concerted and decisive government action in three key areas: poverty, housing and access to primary care.

During the 90s the gap between New Zealand's rich and poor began to widen and this was also when our rates of infectious diseases began to rise. Now some 200,000 New Zealand children live in absolute poverty. Enduring over-crowded conditions and without access to good nutrition and affordable health care, they are much more vulnerable to infectious disease. The government must find ways to reduce the growing gap between the rich and poor.

Secondly, housing is one of our least regulated environments, yet it's where we spend most of our time. This is especially so for children under five. One thing the government needs to consider is introducing a 'warrant of fitness' for houses as has been done in many other countries. Each time a house is sold it must be up to scratch in terms of energy efficiency (insulation etc), general safety and resilience against natural disasters such as earthquakes.

Outside of the moral and health arguments, this will save a huge amount of money. Our recent earthquakes and our leaky buildings are two large housing disasters that have cost the country literally billions. Much of those costs could have been saved if we had in place a comprehensive rating scheme for our houses.

And thirdly, much of the harm from infectious diseases caused by poverty and poor housing can be avoided if they are treated early. However, Baker's research showed many children are being admitted to hospital straight from their homes without having seen a doctor. Removing barriers to basic health care must also be a government priority. Quite simply, getting children to the doctor early will save them from a lengthy illness, and the rest of us from having to pay for their time in hospital.

The government's current commitment to free after hours care for all children under six is welcome news. Its healthy housing initiative has had some excellent results, reducing hospitalisation for infectious diseases in Auckland by as much as 30 percent, so we know these policies work.

We are a progressive and pragmatic nation and our record for dealing with other health problems, such as tuberculosis and meningococcal disease, is excellent. But we are only as strong as our most

poor and defenceless. We quickly need to confirm to the world we *are* a developed country and take the steps we know would reduce poverty and make us all better off.

I'm usually proud to be a New Zealander, but I admit feeling a sense of shame while hearing my country being described as 'third world' on a BBC world service broadcast – with literally millions of listeners worldwide.

It doesn't need to be so.