

GreenvilleOnline.com

January 31, 2010

Rob Morgan: Take time to examine 'unnatural causes'

*By Rob Morgan and
Katy Pugh Smith*

People living in poverty are more likely to suffer from type 2 diabetes and heart disease. African-American babies are more likely to die within their first year of life than white babies, regardless of their mothers' educational attainment. Hispanics are more likely to experience stroke than are Caucasians.

What accounts for the differences?

Recent debates on health-care reform at times blamed poor health on the insurance industry and the health-care delivery system. But as Ichiro Kawachi, epidemiologist with Harvard School of Public Health, has pointed out, "Health care can deal with the diseases and illnesses. But a lack of health care is not the cause of illness and disease. It is like saying that since aspirin cures a fever that the lack of aspirin must be the cause of the fever."

So if it's not health-care services and their affordability, it must be the choices made by poor people and people of color that result in sickness. If a person doesn't eat fruits and vegetables, if he doesn't exercise, then, of course, he's more likely to be sick.

But what if you live in a neighborhood with no supermarket? What if the only fresh foods available to you are soft drinks, chips and candy bars at the corner store?

What if your neighborhood lacks sidewalks and playgrounds or is so crime-ridden that fresh air and exercise are more dangerous than the chronic diseases they combat?

What if the daily pressures of putting any food on the table and keeping a roof over your head make it impossible to worry about anything else?

These are the questions considered by "Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?" This seven-part documentary series examines the ways in which economic and racial differences impact our health, and not just for the poorest in our society. Produced by California Newsreel with Vital Pictures, Inc., it presents a wide array of academic research paired with human stories to illustrate how poor health may not be the result of failed health-care systems or bad personal choices, but instead is a product of the environments in which we live and the policies that affect us.

To provoke conversation on the broader causes of poor health, a partnership of eight organizations invites the community to the "Unnatural Causes" series in Greenville. The sponsors do not have a call to action for the audience, and there is no hidden policy agenda behind the series. In fact, the eight hosts don't necessarily agree on all of the points presented in the documentary.

It is the spirit of contemplation and conversation that we wish to promote through "Unnatural Causes." We believe that after watching an episode of this remarkable documentary, it will be difficult for the audience to see personal health and the community in the same way.

The Piedmont Health Care Foundation, a private, philanthropic foundation that works to improve health in Greenville County by identifying critical issues, catalyzing community action, and supporting organizations' health-related programs, is the lead sponsor of the series. Partners are Bon Secours

St. Francis Health System, the Community Foundation of Greenville, the Greenville County Medical Society, Greenville Forward, Greenville Hospital System, the United Way of Greenville County and Upstate Forever.

Themes presented in the series — including access to quality, affordable housing; job opportunities; clean water; and safe neighborhoods — are of interest to each of the partners in Unnatural Causes. But it's the spirit of dialogue between diverse parties, considering new ideas and developing shared understanding that guides the "Unnatural Causes" events here in Greenville. If that process changes minds and, as a result, changes the community to create healthier people, all the better.

"Unnatural Causes" is open to the community and premieres on Tuesday at the Greenville Tech Barton Campus Auditorium at 6 p.m. The six additional episodes will be shown at noon on Feb. 10, Feb. 24, March 10, March 24, April 7 and April 21 at McAlister Square. Complimentary lunch is provided. Seating is limited and preregistration is required. Visit www.unnaturalcauses.eventbrite.com or call 241-3151. For information on the documentary and to view trailers, visit www.unnaturalcauses.org.

Additional Facts

GUEST COLUMN

Dr. Rob Morgan is a shareholder with Greenville Anesthesiology and serves as chair of the board of directors of the Piedmont Health Care Foundation. Katy Pugh Smith is executive director of the Piedmont Health Care Foundation and facilitates the Healthy Kids, Healthy Greenville coalition.
