

Analytic Perspective

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## Historical Perspective: The social determinants of disease – some roots of the movement

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### Abstract

This is an account of the early days of research on social determinants as I experienced them. I describe my time as one of four Fellows in a new training program in Medical Sociology at Yale University and how I came to be the first Sociologist employed in the U.S. Public Health Service. I then became the first Executive Secretary of a new Study Section at NIH dealing with a small number of research grant proposals in the field of Epidemiology. My account deals with some of my experiences in this developing field, culminating with my appointment as the first Sociologist to become a Professor of Epidemiology in a School of Public Health.

### Introduction

In 2001, a colleague and I wrote an article describing a remarkable phenomenon: between the years 1995 and 2001, there had been ten books published that focused on the social determinants of disease [1]. We suggested that this explosion of work marked the coming of age of the field of social epidemiology. Since that paper appeared, more than a dozen new books dealing with Social Epidemiology have been published, more than a dozen Reports from the Institute of Medicine (National Research Council) have been written on such topics as social and behavioral approaches to racial and ethnic inequalities in health, and hundreds of journal articles have been written on these issues.

In addition to these publications and reports, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has recently established a new program to train postdoctoral scholars in a field they refer to as Health and Society; this training program has a heavy emphasis on the study of the social determinants of disease and is, I believe, the first major national initiative

ever taken to train students in social epidemiology. Perhaps in response to these developments, I was asked by the Department of Epidemiology at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University to give a lecture on "The Social Determinants of Disease: The Roots of the Movement". They wanted me to describe the "beginnings" of the field of social epidemiology on the basis of my personal experience. I received many comments following that talk suggesting it might be of interest to record my remarks in published form and that is the purpose of the present paper.

It is of course presumptuous for me to discuss the beginnings of this work based on my own limited exposure. The real beginning probably begins with Hippocrates and includes such other early scholars as Louis Villerme, Rudolph Virchow, Edgar Sydenstricker, and Emile Durkheim as well as more recent scholars such as Thomas McKeown, Saxon Graham, Mervyn Susser, Leo Reeder, Bruce Dohrenwend, Sol Levine, and John Cassel. My lim-