I thought this module contained a lot of information that often gets overlooked but is very important. Health is a basic need that effects people’s capability to succeed and thrive in every other aspect of their lives. Recognizing how social determinants of health impact other areas of life is key to being able to address disparities and inequality in our society.

One part of this module that I thought was interesting was thinking about defining health and illness. I think in this era of modern medicine, some things get over diagnosed and pathologized where others, particularly those issues affecting less privileged communities, tend to get ignored. In one of my other classes, we talk a lot about the idea of allostatic load. This is the idea that the more a person is dealing with, whether that be psychological or physical stress, the strain their body and immune system are at all times, making them more susceptible to illness, since they are already in a compromised state. Social determinants of health can be considered things that add to or subtract from a person’s allostatic load. Having stable access to basic necessities like nutritious food and safe housing eliminates a huge source of stress compared to those without that same access. Not being constantly under threat of discrimination, whether that be for race, gender, sexuality, etc., is also a major advantage in the same sense. Those who don’t live under these strains every day have a higher capacity to cope with additional adversity like an acute illness.

Additionally, this is all compounded by the fact that people with poorer social determinants of health often receive poorer quality medical care, either because they can’t afford it, or in the case of women, people of color, and trans people, because of biases in the medical community. I felt this was particularly relevant as Arkansas passed a bill this week banning gender-affirming care for trans youth. This prevents a vulnerable group, already at heightened risk for discrimination and mental health issues, from getting the medical care they need. This also relates to the idea of zip code versus genetic code. At least in the United States, a person’s access to medical care depends largely on where they live, mostly due to different regional politics. However, area-specific environmental factors also play a role. The most vulnerable populations are often relegated to living in less safe areas with less access to safe housing, clean water, and good nutrition, among other things. With increasing gentrification, money to improve infrastructure gets diverted to growing urban areas in an effort to make them more desirable to people with more money, hoping to boost the local economy by attracting more consumers. The consequence of this is that the cost of living in these areas increases, pushing those with less out into less desirable areas with worse infrastructure.

Addressing social determinants of health is a huge issue with innumerable facets. To do so will require massive government spending to basically entirely reimagine the current mostly non-existent welfare system.