

Have regional Australians shared equally in health gains?

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John Glover is Director of PHIDU, the Public Health Information Development Unit, at the University of Adelaide. PHIDU is well known for the social health atlases, describing and monitoring the associations between health outcomes and socioeconomic status in Australia since 1992. The atlases present data at a local, regional and national level and, since 2006, have been presented on the Internet using interactive mapping software. In 2007, PHIDU developed its own interactive graphics software, to highlight variations in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas in health status, health outcomes and use of health services in the context of the socioeconomic status of the population. The PHIDU web site is a major resource, providing free access to the largest repository of data describing inequality across the population and providing Australians with data for monitoring changes over time.

Using maps and graphs, this presentation compares and contrasts the experiences of people living in different parts of Australia, as described by statistics on their health and wellbeing and the social and economic profiles of the areas in which they live.

Drawing on the social health atlases of Australia, data will be presented for men and women and for specific diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, examining variations in death rates and hospital admissions over the past twenty years. Variations in smoking rates, physical inactivity and obesity since 2001 will also be described, together with a detailed description of the latest statistics on these health risk factors.

The presentation will examine these variations in relation to the social determinants of health, using both the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and individual measures such as education.

Premature mortality (deaths before 75 years of age) has declined by over 40% in Australia over the past twenty years, a clear indication of the better health outcomes and longer life expectancy experienced by the population overall. However, this good news does not apply evenly across the country, either between regions or within regional areas; that is, despite lower overall death rates in many areas, some areas have only held ground, and others have fallen further behind.

The major variations in admissions to hospital at the regional level will also be discussed, both overall rates and rates for major disease groups.

Similarly, the improvements in participation of young people at 16 years of age in secondary education have not been equally shared. In an age when a sound education is increasingly important as a pathway to employment, financial independence and good physical and mental health and wellbeing, this is also of concern, and a barrier to closing the inequality gap that exists between population groups and regions.