

Universal Basic Income is Key to Maintaining Healthy Populations

Contributed by Gail Lethbridge

What would happen to the health of Canadians if every citizen received a basic income?

This was the topic of a panel discussion at the 17th annual Crossroads Interdisciplinary Health Research Conference at Halifax Regional Library March 15.

The conference, hosted by the Dalhousie Graduate Student Society and the School of Health and Human Performance, brings together student researchers from across Canada and the US to discuss innovative health research.

Universal basic income is a hot topic right now in global politics, policy research, and amongst advocates for poverty reduction. Ontario abandoned a pilot project in basic income when Conservative Doug Ford was elected in 2018. In Nova Scotia, poverty reduction advocates have been pushing for a feasibility study. A Bill was introduced in the Nova Scotia Legislature but was never passed.

So is this possible or desirable in Canada? The panel thinks so, but there will be challenges.

The panel was moderated by **Dr. Rebecca Hasdell**, Dalhousie Food Policy Fellow, and Adjunct Faculty in the Northern Medical Program at the University of Northern British Columbia.

Discussing the issue were **Dr. Christine Saulnier**, Nova Scotia Director, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives; **Graham Steele**, Assistant Professor, Rowe School of Business Dalhousie, and former politician; **Dr. Catherine Mah**, Canada Research Chair in Promoting Healthy Populations, School of Health Administration, and Research Scholar with Healthy Populations Institute, Dalhousie University; and **Dr. Elizabeth Kay-Raining Bird**, Professor, School of Communication Sciences and Disorders, Dalhousie, and Chair, Basic Income Nova Scotia.

All agreed that income is a condition for human health and well-being and that a universal basic income is an important policy instrument to this end.

“Basic income is not a new idea,” said Steele. “It’s been around for a long time. If it’s such a good idea why are we not doing it already?”

There are many reasons according to panelists. Providing a basic income would require major changes in policy and the way we organize our social structures, and tax and electoral systems.

But this has not stopped Canadians before, according to Steele. We have already implemented universal income support for senior citizens. Canada also overcame fierce opposition to provide universal health care.

These policy changes have improved the health and well-being of many Canadians.

“Poverty is not an individual moral failure,” Saulnier told the audience of student health researchers. “It is the result of a policy failure.”

She says a basic income program should also include expansion of public health care, better access to drugs, removing user fees for government services, making university and child care free, and improving access to public transit and affordable housing.

Kay-Raining Bird agrees. She says poverty is a predictor of early illness and hospitalization, longer stays in hospital, earlier death, substance abuse and food insecurity. Poverty also produces what she calls “toxic stress” which leads to hopelessness and despair and affects an individual’s ability to perform in society.

“We need to stop tweaking an ailing system. We need a basic income in my opinion,” said Kay-Raining Bird.

Mah views a basic income program as a way to address one of the biggest health problems in society: food insecurity.

“Food insecurity is not just about missing a lunch or missing a meal,” she said. “It’s a chronic condition of material deprivation.”

And basic income would not just improve the well-being of individuals, it would also improve the health care system because people suffering food insecurity use more healthcare resources than those who are food secure.

In addition to physical problems, food insecurity also produces mental health problems including depression and anxiety.

She said the population segment with the lowest food insecurity is the same population that receives a guaranteed income: seniors.

Steele said that advocates of massive policy changes like universal basic income have to understand how politics works and what issues move votes.

In his 11 years in politics he has learned that politicians tend to be inexperienced in the policy areas they are being asked to change.

Researchers can help by providing the in-depth background and analysis that leads to evidence-informed decision-making.

If health researchers want to put their knowledge into action for something like basic income, they need to advocate in a non-partisan way and speak to the largest number of voters possible. They also need to be persistent and find champions within government.

“Don’t just analyze,” Steele told student health researchers. “Organize”