

Opposition day debate

Health Inequalities

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Health Inequalities – Miriam Cates MP – Penistone and Stocksbridge

There is clear evidence that deprivation has a big impact on health and life expectancy. Preventing disease and encouraging healthy lifestyles are the key drivers in reducing poor health and early deaths in all communities, but particularly in more deprived areas. So much is known now that was not understood in previous generations about the importance of exercise, maintaining a healthy weight, stopping smoking, and eating fruit and vegetables. We may know what we need to do to give ourselves the best chance of staying healthy, but there are many barriers that prevent us from making those choices. Those barriers are far higher for people living in more deprived areas.

Low household income is a barrier to good health. If people are struggling to make ends meet, making sure that they eat their five-a-day, and exercise three times a week is not an urgent priority, or perhaps is even affordable. That is why the Government's commitment to raising the National Living Wage is so important.

However, we know that there is more to do.

A second barrier is infrastructure. For many of my constituents in the rural villages around Penistone and Stocksbridge, it can take a whole day to travel to and from a hospital appointment in Sheffield because the buses are so few and far between. The Government's commitments to improving bus services are vital to people who rely on public transport for access to healthcare.

A further barrier is lack of information. Increasingly, health and medical information is going online, so we must tackle inequalities in digital skills and access.

There is much that the Government, and our fantastic NHS, are doing to tackle health inequalities, but there is also an important role for our families and communities in helping people to get, and to stay, healthy. Community groups are vital in giving people hands-on and practical health advice and helping us to move towards healthy lifestyles. In my constituency, the Oughtibridge Stride Out running club has helped many of my friends from the couch to 5k—although I am afraid I am still at the couch end of that. We also have Stocksbridge leisure centre, which is run by and for the community and is pioneering social prescribing.

As human beings, we exist not in isolation but in relationship to those around us. Relationships with our family, friends and communities are so important, and they are

often our first port of call when we have health concerns. Breastfeeding support is a brilliant example. There is clear evidence that being breastfed improves a person's chances of being healthy, but—I say this from lengthy experience—breastfeeding can be tough, and new mums need support from friends, family and community to keep going. I was lucky enough to have support from fantastic community groups when I had my first child, and I could not have kept going without that.

Levelling up our left-behind areas is not just about better buses and trains; it is about investing in communities. We need to make every effort to reduce health inequalities by funding our NHS, raising incomes, improving infrastructure and helping people gain access to information, but we must also recognise the importance of family, friends and community to our health, and I therefore welcome our manifesto commitments to a programme of strengthening families and championing family hubs.