



Life and health across the divide

JOHN ASHTON points the way to a healthy north to balance an increasingly stressful south.

THAT most health is gained and lost in everyday life was a fundamental truth which came to be accepted by the Victorians, faced with horrific epidemics of infectious disease in the great industrial cities against a background of poverty, squalor and malnutrition.

Shelter, food, the purity of air and water, freedom from fear, the safety of the physical environment and the possibilities for fulfilling work and leisure remain the prerequisites for good health.

Apart from the recent appearance of AIDS, infectious disease is no longer the main threat to public health in developed societies. Instead the Reaper's hierarchy is headed up by heart disease and strokes, accidents, cancers, suicide, alcohol and drugs. We have increasingly come to see that these are predominantly avoidable at least

until old age and that reducing the risk factors for them means paying attention to the importance of such concepts as self-esteem and empowerment, of the extent to which people feel valued and in control of their own lives.

There has been a growing awareness of the danger of victim blaming - of blaming people for the way they live - and a restatement of the basis of public health that it is the interaction between environments and people in that environment is a habitat which is the important focus for intervention. It is for this reason that public health and town planning have so much of a shared ancestry.

Stress as a mediating factor between lifestyles - risk factors such as smoking and drinking, environment and ill-health - remains an enigma, but many people have come to accept that whatever it is, stress must play a

powerful part and the World Health Organisation speaks of the importance of making the healthy choices the easy choices through public policies which create supportive environments.

Questions of the quality of life and well-being therefore become central to a modern understanding of what constitutes a healthy person or community.

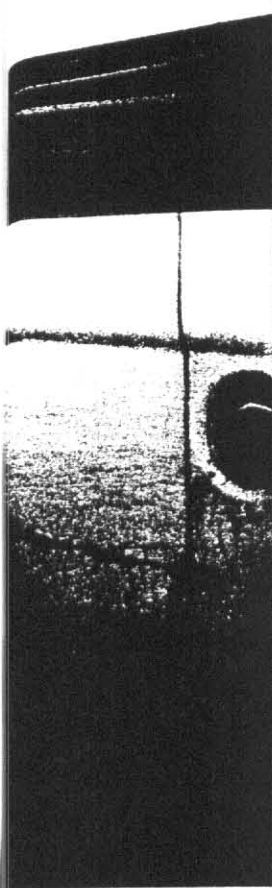
It is against this background that any consideration of the impact of the north-south divide on health should be made.

There has now been a succession of reports which show quite clearly the regional variations in mortality which exist independently of social class. The most recent of these, *The Health Divide* by Margaret Whitehead which was published in 1987, shows why it is in the north that the gap between the health of the rich and the poor is at its greatest: mortality for male manual workers is 188 per cent of that for male professionals and for women the figure is 170 per cent.

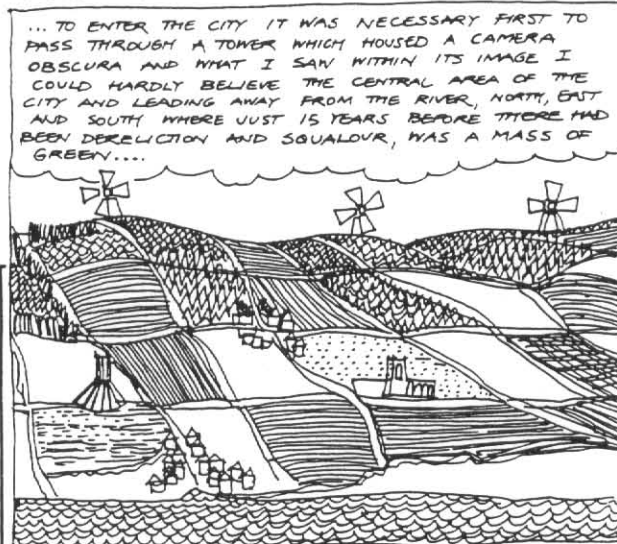
These orders of difference extend to data on disease and fitness. Although within each social class the same geographical variations are found, large differences exist between communities in the same city or district. In Sheffield for instance there was a difference in male life expectancy of over eight years between the most affluent and the most deprived. However, in general,

... Mortality for male manual workers is 188 per cent of that for male professionals, and for women 170 per cent ...

● An unhealthy and stressful south-east traffic jam (picture: Adrian Rowland).



Healthy vision: News from Esmedune



● A vision of Esmedune, from John Ashton's pamphlet. Drawing by Robert MacDonald, Liverpool Polytechnic School of the Built Environment.

statistical pictures of these pockets of affluence are swamped by the large proportions of the population living in deprived circumstances.

On the face of it the growing polarisation between the employed and affluent south and the relatively unemployed and poor north might be expected to become greater and greater as we move towards the end of the century. Yet there are straws in the wind which indicate that future scenarios may be more complicated than that and that we might be in a position to choose a healthier future for the north and prevent a possible downturn in health status of southerners.

AS Brian Redhead pointed out in his foreward to the TCPA report *North-South Divide*, 'there are pockets of poverty in the south and pockets of prosperity in the north. I would go further and say that those in interesting and gainful employment in the north can lead a better life than those in the south!'

There really can be little doubt of this - high quality living and working conditions, cheap housing, short travelling times and easy access to cultural and recreation facilities, empty roads and a lack of traffic jams - these are a reality for many professional and business people living in Liverpool and similar cities.

WHAT would a healthy city be like? John Ashton's new pamphlet *Esmedune 2000: Vision or dream?* describes a William Morris-style trip into the Liverpool of 12 years' time. 'Esmedune', incidentally, is Anglo-Saxon for *Toxteth*:

'A growing awareness of the environment and of the issues raised by transport had led to the simultaneous realisation in many communities of the toll which the car was taking; with accidents as the most important cause of death and disability between the ages of one and 35 years, motor cars were one of the easiest things to do something about. They were now banned from the city centre except for taxis; bicycles had become very popular and in many quarters communal bicycles had become commonplace.

The tram line had been rebuilt in 1993 to link up the historic sites of Liverpool, the new pastoral areas of the inner city and the farm communes which had become a feature of the large band of fringe land between town and country in recent years. Thus the distinction between town and country had become progressively blurred.

The tram ran along the

old dock road, gradually moving away from the river and climbing up towards Vauxhall and Everton Hill. The transformation was miraculous. Where once had been the decaying remains of Victorian heavy dock industry, there were now dozens of imaginative small local enterprises. Workshops, bake houses, market and allotment gardens spreading out in all directions from modest but well built houses which gave the immediate impression both that they had been built with commitment and care and that they were part of a thriving community.

Perhaps most striking was the street life centred on pavement cafes and small parks in what was clearly a village of the city which had re-emerged from the stranglehold of the motor roads. Above all there was a complete absence of litter.

The topography of the area for so long obscured by dense development had been partially revealed; the hills and slopes could be seen through clearings and across the new hardwood forest whose trees were still at an early stage of growth, a forest which had been planted with such

enthusiasm by the local children. A river tributary long since converted into a culvert had been uncovered and restored as a brook gently tipping down into the river. On Everton Hill a windmill's sails turned slowly in the light afternoon breeze.

At Vauxhall I left the tram and made straight away to the community centre which I was pleased to find combined together with a school. Although it was late afternoon there was activity everywhere. I soon understood that, in the new situation where it was assumed that parents of either sex were entitled to work and that children needed the opportunity for social activity after school, such was the range of activities now on offer that many children preferred to stay at the school for their evening meal.

I had arrived in time for tea ...

Esmedune 2000 is available as part of the *Healthy Cities starter resource pack*, at £6 from: Dr John Ashton, Department of Community Health, University of Liverpool, PO Box 147, Liverpool L69 3BX.

BRASS TACKS



● The Glasgow Garden Festival tramrail system

Product of the month: Festival tramway

VISITORS to the Glasgow Garden Festival could hardly have failed to notice the glorious giant floral 'singposts' for the tramway halts. Indeed, they noticed and travelled on the trams too - one of the festival's successful features.

The five trams ran along the course of a redundant dockland railway although most of the track was replaced by modern rails. These together with the overhead masts, refurbishment of existing power supply, switch gear equipment and installation of a new transformer and rectifier took just four months to install. The 1 km route was built by Pirelli Construction.

They anticipate that similar light rapid transit (LRT) systems will become more than just a temporary tourist attraction - this one is to be dismantled this month. Initially perhaps, LRT systems will follow redundant or existing rail tracks but in time tracks and overhead support systems can be laid along city centre streets and in existing pedestrian areas.

LRTs, Pirelli Construction argues, are a cheaper solution to city congestion than underground systems, and the track, rolling stock and overhead cables are relatively maintenance-free and long lasting.

● Pirelli Construction Ltd, PO Box 6, Leigh Road, Eastleigh, Hampshire, SO5 5YE

the abandoned slimmed down post-industrial cities which now have the opportunity of becoming eco-cities, characterised by the criteria identified by Malcolm Fitzpatrick.

- Minimal intrusion into the national state.
- Maximal variety and choice.
- A closed system - self sustaining in energy and resources.
- Optimum balance between population and resource use.

To achieve such cities, what is now needed is first vision and second political commitment. We have perhaps 10 years to seize the opportunity to get behind our northern cities and help them on the path to this post-industrial productive and desirable future before many of them slide further down the slope of decay and abandonment.

By that time without positive action the albatross of the south east will have finally been revealed for the disaster area which it must become, and will suck in all the nation's resources in an attempt to retrieve the unretrievable.

If we do make a creative choice of futures a newly vibrant north may by that time be in a position to lend a hand to the south.

● Dr John Ashton is a senior lecturer at the Liverpool University's department of community medicine. The book *Channel 4's healthy cities series Cities Fit to Live in* is available for £4.95 from Channel 4, PO Box 4000, London W3 6XS

There is often too an abundance of open space: at the moment much of it is derelict, but it is increasingly being 'greened' in ways which add enormously to the attractiveness of the environment and begin to give a feeling for the kind of neo-rustic post-industrial future which could be possible for many of our cities with imaginative productive land uses. These include the development of allotment gardens, urban farms or, as already exists in inner city Liverpool, a community-owned urban horticulture business growing herbs and shrubs in very high quality conditions under glass - one example of the various experiments which are now going on into new employment possibilities.

There is currently an active exploration of alternative forms of energy production and transport which are non-polluting and ecologically sound and, in the case of transport, which promote physical fitness. Many southern cities are now involved with the proposed cycle network which will span the country using disused railway tracks by the end of the century. For those who have not had to join the hordes of emigres or weekly commuters to the south, we still have extensive supportive networks of family and friends to turn to in times of stress or ill-health.

Contrast this with the condition of life in the south east: gross overcrowding, ridiculous house prices which mean that

couples must both work to service the mortgage which is a constant source of stress and friction, long frustrating and expensive travel times both to work and to escape into the countryside, paradoxically in the metropolis less access to culture and the arts because of the transport problems, little opportunity to develop alternative lifestyles or land-use forms and a lack of kinship networks of support for those newly arrived. In short a stressful environment with a poor quality of life which must affect health in the future.

In contrast many of the causes of ill-health in the north are historic and have been eliminated along with the jobs. The key issue here is the creation of new healthful employment.

ACCORDING to Hancock and Dahl 'a healthy city is one that is continually creating and improving those physical and social environments and expanding those community resources which enable people to support each other in performing all the functions of life and in developing themselves to their maximum potential'.

As we move towards the year 2000, by which time the overwhelming majority will live in large towns or cities, this prospect seems to be slipping progressively away from those living in the south-east of England and in similar capital metropolises.

Compare this with the possibilities for

Further reading

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3. Ashton, J. *Esmedune 2000: vision or dream? a healthy Liverpool*. A resource for the WHO Healthy cities project, Department of Community Health, University of Liverpool, 1988.
4. Ashton, J. and Hancock, T. *Healthy Cities: Concepts and Visions. A resource for the WHO Healthy Cities Project*, Department of Community Health, University of Liverpool 1988.
5. Robertson, J. *Future Work*, Gower/Temple Smith, 1985.
6. Hancock, T. and Dahl, L.J. *Healthy Cities: Promoting Health in the Urban Context*, Background paper for the WHO Healthy Cities Project, 1986. Available from WHO Copenhagen.
7. Fitzpatrick, M. *Environmental Health Planning: Community Development based on Environmental and Health precepts*, Cambridge/M.A. Ballinger, 1978.