



The economic recession and illness

In May 1934, an editorial comment titled, *Sickness and the economic depression*, was published. This followed a survey that had recorded illnesses for a three-month period in 1933 and an income and employment record for four years among 12 000 families in 10 USA cities following the Great Depression. The investigators concluded that: "The highest illness rate was reported by a group which was in reasonably comfortable circumstances in 1929, but which had dropped to comparative poverty by 1932".¹

You may be wondering about my editorial focus at this particular moment in world history. We seem to be having another downturn in the economy, following the 2008-2010 global recession which primarily affected the developed world, with varying degrees of contagion in developing countries, including South Africa. Jobs were lost and are still being lost, particularly in the Euro zone. Some of the heavily indebted nations such as Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal have instituted various austerity measures. These have included massive budget cuts, workforce rightsizing and increased taxes. In the light of these unpopular, economic measures, the question needs to be asked: "Will the recession be bad for our health?"

Based on the 1934 editorial, in terms of health outcomes, it was definitely bad for those American families whose living conditions worsened following the Great Depression. After the recent global recession, an article published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, asked the following questions: "Does a contracting economy actually affect the health of a population? And if so, how?" It reported that research has found a strong correlation between job loss and clinical and subclinical depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and antisocial behaviour.² The findings of other studies on the effect of a contracting economy, on persons other than those who had lost their jobs, remain controversial. However, the literature also includes studies that show that a contracting economy affects health by distracting or impeding people from adherence to preventive measures.

The loss of medical aid usually follows job loss. Health-seeking behaviour patterns change from affordability, mainly in the private healthcare sector, to availability, in the relatively free public healthcare sector. The unemployed defer healthcare treatment due to health costs and only seek help when acutely ill.

A recent commentary provided a detailed analysis of the recent recession on our health and predicted the following:³

- *High-income countries*: It appears unlikely that the recent recession will have major negative effects on overall population health indicators, such as all-cause mortality or life expectancy. However, the health of population groups who have been particularly hard hit by retrenchment is likely to suffer, especially with regard to mental health effects, such as increased depression and suicide rates.
- *Middle-income countries*: There may be no effect in any direction.
- *Low-income countries*: The global economic crisis will pose a severe threat to overall population health, as people will hardly be able to cushion themselves with their own accumulated wealth.

From the preliminary review of evidence at our disposal, when answering the question of whether or not the recession will be bad for our health, the response is: "It depends on where you live in the world". The South African government needs to assess the effect of the current global downturn on the health indicators of its people. There is an urgent need for innovative ways to create more jobs, and at the same time, proactively provide affordable health care for all. The efforts of the national health department to re-engineer primary health care and introduce National Health Insurance may provide a solution. We urgently need South African studies that will inform us of the possible effects of the recession on our people's health so that this can inform policy. Your comments in response to this editorial would be appreciated.

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References

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