

## Report on the Health Inequalities Research Network (HERON) Conference, 14-15th May 2014

by Dr Patrick O' Donnell (PHE)

In May I attended the first Health Inequalities Research Network (HERON) conference in London. It was hosted by King's College London at the Coin Street neighbourhood centre. HERON was founded by researchers at King's College and Columbia University in New York and is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK and the National Institutes of Health in the US. HERON seeks to bring clinicians, researchers and representatives of communities together to work towards improving health for all. It also seeks to provide support and a platform for community members seeking to organise and address health inequalities in their localities. With that, they seek to promote and publicise efforts to address health inequalities in the media. This conference was the first major event highlighting the work of HERON and similar researchers internationally.

The location itself was a bright and welcoming community centre that showcased what community care can look like when it is well planned and funded. The conference programme was varied, with much of the research coming from UK universities. There were sessions on health policy, child health, migrant health and patient engagement in research, among others. Two things were obvious from the presentations I attended; the first was the amount and scope of data on public health collected in the UK, with specific details on health indicators available by postcode. The other issue was the changes to the English health system since the Health and Social Care Act 2012 was enacted, and how the commissioning of health services happens in different localities. It seems to me that some of the uniformity of health service provision is lost, as different commissioning groups may have different priorities.

The particular session I was involved in was about improving community access to healthcare. For my presentation the 'community' in question was vulnerable patients whose primary care needs are not met by existing health services in Limerick city. Another presenter spoke about efforts to improve the experiences of migrants suffering from psychosis when accessing psychological therapies. These patients have multiple barriers and stigma attached to seeking help and then continuing with the therapeutic care provided.

The keynote address was given by Professor David Williams of Harvard University. He is a professor of public health, professor of African and African American studies and professor of sociology. He has published widely on health inequalities and the social determinants of health and has been honoured numerous times for his work on health in the USA. His talk was engaging and accessible for all, bearing in mind the variety of disciplines and groups in attendance for the session. His main treatise is that above all else, socioeconomic status is the most powerful predictor of health. While most of his statistics were from US data, he went on to say that the same findings have been borne out internationally. He also said that being exposed to multiple challenges and adversity over years worsens again the health status of lower socioeconomic groups. It is definitely worth reading.

To read more about HERON see:

[www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/groups/heron/index.aspx](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/groups/heron/index.aspx)

To read Prof Williams lecture to the HERON conference see: [www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/groups/heron/news/HERON-2014-David-Williams.pdf](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/groups/heron/news/HERON-2014-David-Williams.pdf)

To read more about commissioning in NHS England see:

[www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/commissioning](http://www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/commissioning)

To read more about the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation see: [www.rwjf.org](http://www.rwjf.org)