



School for Public Health Research @ LSHTM (SPHR@L)

SPHR@L Seminar Series: 2014-2015

A talk by **Dr. Gemma Phillips**
University of Edinburgh and University of Glasgow

Thursday, 16th October 2014, 12:45 pm

Jerry Morris A, LSHTM, 15-17 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9SH

Abstract

Politics, localism and epistemologies of practice: How will evidence-based public health fare in the world of local government?

The recent move of public health back to English local government has reignited debates about the role of a medicalised public health profession. It should be a move that refocusses attention to action on the social determinants of health. Public health specialists are keen to ensure the use of evidence to support this action.

However, if a discourse of 'evidence based' policy is in principle (if not practice) relatively unproblematic within the health arena, how will it fair within the more overtly politicised world of local government? What will be the impact of different imperatives for policy and practice and a different professional structure and culture? What is evidence in local government and how is it both constituted and used in practice?

We used ethnographic methods to explore the workings of local authorities in England during the first year of the reorganised public health function. With a focus on alcohol policy but including broader service areas, in this seminar we will explore how local government decisions that affect public health are rationalised and enacted through discourses of localism, empiricism and holism. We highlight the plural and contingent nature of policy and practice priorities; the health of different publics recognised by local authorities may be at odds with one another. Normative discourses of evidence based policy sit uneasily in an arena where there is rarely one unified goal.

We discuss the possible implications for future public health practice and research in local government.

Dr. Gemma Phillips is a Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, Centre for Population Health Sciences and a Research Associate at the University of Glasgow, MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit. She was previously a Research Fellow at SPHR@L.