BOOK REVIEWS

Risk communication and public health.

P Bennett, K Calman. (Pp 272; price not stated). New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. ISBN 0-19-263037-7

In this global and fragmented society, where citizens do not have direct experience of many questions that influence their health, and where political decisions affect more and more diverse and dispersed individuals, public communication plays a central part in management and prevention of public risk.

With the intention of highlighting common experiences in this controversial field of work, in November of 1997, the British Department of Health organised a conference that assembled public health professionals, academics, members of the government and its advisory committees, campaigning organisations, and consultants specialising in risk assessment and communication. This book is a compilation of those interventions, perfected and extended.

The 20 contributions of recognised prestige authors are structured in four sections. The first one is centred on the overhaul of investigations on the subject; the second one portrays a compilation of some risk communication cases in the UK; the third one presents a review of the debate about the institutions and actors that manage risk; and the fourth one offers practical implications of the reviewed questions in a pragmatic way.

"Communication of risk", as a concept, is understood throughout the manual as an essential part of the public policy. Most authors appreciate that scientists, politicians and consumers are the elementary actors in the analysed process. Nevertheless, the book does not cover an in depth reflection on other fundamental nodes in the process of risk communication, like mass media, or doctors, who are basic transmitters in the process of the sanitary communication.

The book is essentially descriptive, and is a high quality compilation for those who are in charge to solve, or to evaluate the risk. Nevertheless, the volume is little encouragement for those who are really dedicated to communicate it.

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The epidemiology of neurological disorders. C N Martin, R A C Hughes, eds. (Pp 248; price not stated). London: BMJ Books, 1998. ISBN 0-7279-1149-X

Neuroepidemiology is an aetiological heterogeneous application field of epidemiology, for instance, compared with cancer or vascular epidemiology, kept compact by the weight of the neurological diagnosis and the expanding size of the population segment affected with neurological disorders. The book ranks fifth in the history of neuroepidemiological handbooks in English¹⁻⁴ and compared with them

presents some advantageous and innovative characteristics.

The updated reviews focus on the most prevalent disorders, such as epilepsy, dementia, head injury, parkinsonisms, peripheral neuropathies and stroke, as well as on less frequent ones (multiple sclerosis and motor neurone disease), but also on aspects not dealt with in previous volumes: schizophrenia and neurological disability. Readers expecting systematic views used in previous manuals including the descriptive, analytical and clinical perspectives of each group of disorders² will be disappointed. As the editors point out, the book, published as separate chapters in the *BMJ* does not pretend to be a systematic coverage of the field of neurological pathology. In addition, authors choose, fortunately in my opinion, different approaches with particular interest in aetiology in the well structured chapters on parkinsonisms and dementia, classification in epilepsy, public health in head injury, genetics in multiple sclerosis and basic behavioural concepts in neurological disability, where the book reaches maximum interest. Pioneering the field of disability, in a chapter by D Wade, the manual incorporates a dimension particularly relevant in society, because of the predominance of neurological impairment among the disabled population.

Methodological aspects, taken into specific consideration in previous manuals remain out of the scope of this book, as well as—surprisingly—highly prevalent, severe or recently debated disorders such as headache, spinal cord injury and CNS infections including Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. As the references finish at 1996 the book, will be soon outdated, which is a problem particularly relevant in 2000 because of the remarkable recent research results in several aetiological fields (infections and arteriosclerosis, diet and parkinsonisms, cerebrovascular risk factors and dementia, and prions and spongiform encephalopathies).

An overwhelming majority of clinicians among the author list characterise handbooks in neuroepidemiology. This book is not an exception. While advantages in writing for the majority of readers, clinicians and caring personnel, can be obtained from such choice, others may enjoy the subtle thinking of specific authors such as Ben-Shlomo and Van Duijn in the fields of parkinsonisms and dementia, able to convey clear balanced messages, by overcoming the bipolar threats of the restrictive view versus the uninformative multiple accumulation of results through authoritative criticism and careful reports selection.

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- 1 Gorelick PB, Alter M, eds. *Handbook of neuroepidemiology*. New York: Marcel Dekker, 1994.
- 2 Anderson DW, ed. *Neuroepidemiology: a tribute to Bruce Schoenberg*. Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1991.
- 3 Schoenberg BS, ed. *Neurological epidemiology: principles and clinical applications*. New York: Raven Press, 1978.
- 4 Kurland LT, Kurtzke JF, Goldberg ID, eds. *Epidemiology of neurologic and sense organ disorders*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973.

Anthropology in public health. Bridging differences in culture and society. Robert A Hahn, ed. (Pp 384; price not stated). New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. ISBN: 0-19-512902-4 (cloth); 0-19-511955-X (paper).

The stated objectives of this anthology are to provide examples, for both public health and kindred audiences, on how anthropology is useful, if not necessary, in public health and to describe that discipline, supplying, as well, resources for its further exploration and application. In doing so, the editor, an epidemiologist and renowned anthropologist, has chosen studies conducted in North and South America, as well as in Africa, Europe, Asia, and Oceania. The 16 chapters contained in the anthology have been structured in an introduction and six sections, each of them devoted to a general topic, namely: infectious diseases, cancer, pharmacy and nutrition, injuries and occupational health, community health, and finally, health institutions. The introduction gives us an insight into the main characteristics of anthropology as a scientific discipline so that public health workers can know about them. The following chapters try to show the relevant role of anthropology in tackling a wide range of public health problems. Generally speaking, the book fulfils its aim and all the works presented offer good evidence of the importance of anthropology for public health.

But, although the authors and the editor are committed to showing how useful, if not necessary, it is to translate the knowledge of public health practices for its use in specific social and cultural settings, there are no clear examples of this in "at home" environments. All the chapters are devoted to international health, or to minorities, and none of them refers to the need for translation between public health experts and the layman in contexts where, in theory, there seem to be coincidences between both groups as regards public health concepts. Consequently, we do not find a critical examination of concepts in public health sciences as a golden standard. The absence of this kind of study can be considered a weakness of the book, as anthropology can also become a powerful tool in understanding non-compliance with preventive measures in Europe or in North America. This circumstance may be related both to the authors' background, all of whom received training in North American universities, and to their experience concerning work with other cultures. The absence of scholars belonging to several academic traditions is probably another weak point in this work. But on the whole, every public health worker will surely find in this book a very interesting and very useful illustration of the role of anthropology in public health.

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