

Concern for Europe's Tomorrow. Health and the Environment in the WHO European Region. WHO European Centre for Health and the Environment (ed). (Pp 537; DM/SFr 156) Stuttgart Regional Office for Europe WHO, 1995. ISBN 3-8047-1406-4.

This book contains the findings of the major study undertaken by the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health. The centre was asked during the preparation for the Second European Conference on Environment and Health, held in June 1994, to assess all aspects of environmental health in the countries of the European Region. The outcome of this assessment is contained in this report, which is unique in that it presents for the first time a Europe-wide picture of environmental health, set out in a readily readable and accessible form within one volume.

The 19 chapters are divided into three parts. The first introduces and discusses the factors influencing the state of the environment, such as economic activity and environmental management, as well as profiling the state of human health across Europe. The middle section presents and discusses the detail of the nature and extent of environmental exposure, with the final chapters concerned with analysis, discussion, and the recommendations of the findings of the survey.

This publication merits more than a casual glance, it is a useful source of reference which will be of value to a range of personnel for a range of purposes. Whether your interest is in the extent of acid deposition in the European Region, or in obtaining data about the effects on health of environmental exposure then this publication will be of value.

As the foreword states 'this report is intended to be of assistance in rational decision making, so that real priorities may be identified and limited resources efficiently utilised.' I think it ably provides that assistance.

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The Common Sense for a First Course in Statistics. T P Hutchinson. (Pp 29; £2.00) Rumsby Scientific Publishing: Adelaide, 1995. ISBN 0 646 24865 0

Those studying statistics for the first time will find the advice in this booklet invaluable. It is not a textbook, but is, in general, an easily read few pages of good advice on how to stop techniques overwhelming common sense. The basis of the book is summed up by the author as 'When studying something for the first time, it is easy to become mentally overwhelmed by the details.... Perhaps more important than the details is that you have an overall vision of what you are doing and that you know the general features of what you will see when you give a command to your computer - so that you can spot gross errors.' The book contains many illustrations of how this approach can be applied. There are 38 short sections grouped as: data description; probability; sampling distributions; test interpretations; and data collection.

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The Genetic Variation and Human Disease: Principles and Evolutionary Approaches. Kenneth Weiss (Pp 354; £16.95). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. ISBN 0-521-3366-0.

This is a revised paperback of the earlier hardback edition (ISBN 0-521-33421-7, £45.00). Professor Weiss provides an excellent up to date overview of the molecular and statistical methods required for the investigation of biological traits. Methods of segregation analysis and linkage mapping in families are discussed providing clear examples.

The text of this useful book is full of explanatory figures, tables, and equations. This book should provide a valuable reference for the students and researchers in the field of epidemiology, human genetics and anthropology.

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Radiation Dose Reconstruction for Epidemiologic Uses. National Research Council (Pp 138; £24.95) Oxford: National Academy Press, 1995. ISBN 0-309-05099-5.

This is a curious book. It is not what the title might suggest, namely a straightforward account of the retrospective assessment of radiation exposures. Instead it is a cross between a primer and the unheaven output of several high powered think tanks.

Radiation epidemiology, because of the latency of many of the outcomes of interest, must rely heavily on the modelling and inference of radiation exposures in different situations. An example of this is the life span study, the long running investigation into the mortality experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki bomb survivors. This programme has been operating for nearly 50 years and during that time a number of separate, distinct, and increasingly sophisticated efforts have been made to model exposure, dose, and modifying factors. The practical effect of these modelling exercises which have 'moved' attributable dose up, and down, quite significantly has of course been to impact on risk estimates.

The range of dose reconstructions that are attempted is considerable. Reconstructions may be done for an event (eg, Three Mile Island), an activity (eg, being shellfish eater near a power station) or an occupation (eg, industrial radiographer). Therefore the accumulated wisdom distilled in this book is the outcome of an enormous amount of work by an enormous number of people over many years.

At the primer level, it offers a series of vignettes on 'how to do it'. These are most interesting and offer illuminating insights into the methodological pitfalls which lie to catch the unwary. It is probably here that the major wider interest focus of the book lies. There is an increasing interest in examining occupational and environmental exposures of populations retrospectively. In many ways, the approaches developed in the radiation field can be seen as generic and path-finding and thus capable of adaptation to other exposures. It is foolish to reinvent the wheel when it has been so thoroughly invented already.

The epidemiology section is, for the professional epidemiologist, very lightweight (even perhaps for the postgraduate student). However, as a thumbnail sketch, it offers a insight into the activities, preoccupations, and drivers of the community of epidemiologists practising in the field. On the other hand the think tank conclusions and 'ideas for the future' of a number of the chapters are so specialised as to be of interest only to players in the field.

If the book is not for the mythic 'intelligent and interested layman' (the scientific equivalent of the man of the Clapham omnibus), it could be of interest to a quite wide range of other folk. There is easily digestible material here for those in the scientific media. There is much, as has been said, for those looking at reconstructing historical exposures other than in radiation epidemiology. It is probably obligatory reading for those actually in radiation epidemiology any way. Additionally biologists who wish to know something of radiation exposures and epidemiology could usefully dip into small sections and acquire much useful information quickly.

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The Condom Effectiveness Matrix: An analytical tool for defining condom research properties. Brenda E Spencer (pp 84; 90 Ff) Paris: Les Editions INSERM, 1994. ISBN 2-85598-581-1.

Don't let the title put you off. I found this 83 page report very readable and well structured. The work was funded by the WHO Global Programme on AIDS to review existing literature on the condom and define research priorities for the prevention of HIV/sexually transmitted disease transmission. The author is a well established expert in this area and a bibliography of over 400 references is included, the latest up to 1993. The main purpose of the book is to integrate into an analytical matrix the many different types of questions which each contribute part of the answer to 'How effective is the condom in the prevention of HIV/STD?' Questions start from the most basic - the technical quality of the product - and proceed through successive sets of intervening factors such as manual skills, sexual practices, sociocultural factors, appropriateness of means of distribution, and needs assessment. How the condom relates to other preventive strategies including mutual monogamy, abstinence, non-penetrative sexual practices, spermicides, and the female condom are also discussed. Ambivalence of intention and risk taking, couple communication, and other psychosocial aspects are referenced, as are the political and economic factors influencing condom availability and acceptability, including alarming calculations of the actual quantities of condoms required if all the needs of a particular population are to be covered.

This book is addressed to those who conduct and those who commission research, to policy makers and to field workers. There is comment about the unhelpful plethora of questionnaires which have been issued to captive groups such as young people in education and which make limited contribution to our understanding. The book is very readable despite the complexity of the issues examined