

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

and will be a superb basic reference for anyone considering quality research in this area.

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Epidemiology and the delivery of health care services: Methods and application.

Denise M Oleske (ed) (Pp 235; £45.00) New York Plenum Press, 1995. ISBN 0-30644968-4.

There has been a growing emphasis on the application of epidemiological methods in the planning of health care services. In the United Kingdom this has been highlighted by the epidemiologically based needs assessment reports which have been sponsored by the National Health Service Executive. This, however, is a large two volume work. Smaller epidemiological texts cover basic principles without addressing these specifically to health care planning.

This book from the United States covers many of the general principles in a single condensed volume and relates them specifically to health care planning. It is evidently written for an American audience and some of the examples are irrelevant to other countries. In addition, it covers some of the same material as the book by Selwyn St Leger *et al*, entitled *Evaluating health services' effectiveness*, which is more applicable to the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, this book, edited by Denise Oleske, updates previous textbooks by including business planning techniques as applied to health care services, a practice which has become increasingly prevalent in health services throughout the world. Successive chapters cover the basics of epidemiological techniques comprehensively, although readers will probably need some previous knowledge of statistics to understand some of the chapters fully. There is a very useful chapter on strategic planning and epidemiology. As regards measuring outcome of health care and health services, the book includes recent developments in business and epidemiological techniques such as quality management, the 'plan, do, study, act' (PDSA) cycle, practice guidelines, and critical pathways. The book also covers the evaluation of health care systems and technology, as well as including a section on communicable disease control. There is, however, very little mention on the role of primary care.

There are useful exercises at the end of each chapter to help readers apply their newly acquired knowledge to practical situations, with model answers at the end.

In conclusion, the book provides a useful summary for purchasers and planners of health care, as well as postgraduate students in public health medicine, of business and epidemiological health care planning in a single volume. Readers in countries other than the United States would however need to supplement the book with more locally relevant texts.

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Homelessness and ill health. A report of a working party of the Royal College of Physicians. James Connelly and June Crown (eds) (Pp 143; £8.50) London: The Royal College of Physicians, 1995. ISBN 186016-009-3.

This is a welcome report that provides a critical summary of the scientific literature concerning the connection between homelessness and ill health in the United Kingdom. It also makes recommendations as to how health services, local authorities, and primary care can help to address the problem. The report highlights homelessness as being part of a spectrum of housing need. At one extreme are those who are statutorily accepted as being homeless, while at the other there are individuals who are currently within households but where relationships and living conditions are highly unsatisfactory and intolerable. Housing need would also encompass occupiers of short term housing tenancies which are increasingly the norm in the privately rented market.

The report primarily concerns itself with the two groups of greatest housing need. The first are the 'official homeless'. In the United Kingdom these individuals have a statutory right to be housed by local authorities and are mainly families and pregnant women (group 1). The second group consists of rough sleepers, night shelter and hostel users, or self referrals to bed and breakfast hotels (group 2). These individuals are mainly single and are not included in official statistics. The authors of the report make the point that the official homeless are only a small part of the problem and that the current mix of housing is unable to meet needs adequately.

The authors explore the complex relation between homelessness and ill health. People with ill health are less likely to receive housing that meets their needs and are also at increased risk of homelessness. Procedures for housing the homeless on the basis of being officially homeless, or on the basis of medical priority are inadequate in meeting the requirements of individuals with health needs.

Both groups of homeless individuals covered by the report show evidence of increased mental and physical ill health, and high rates of utilisation of hospital and community services. Access to primary care is often difficult because of the way patients are registered with a general practice. The working party emphasises, however, that groups 1 and 2 are quite different in terms of social demographic and health profile and need different interventions.

The report's recommendations to government, local authorities, and the health service are useful but often do not go far enough. In particular, not enough emphasis is given to the association between homelessness and poverty, and the effect of government policy on welfare benefits that helps to exacerbate the problem. These include changes to the benefit system, which will restrict access to the payment of mortgages for the newly unemployed. Having said that, the report provides useful suggestions on how to improve services for the homeless and the appendices provide useful examples of good practice from various parts of Great Britain.

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Sexual Health Promotion in General Practice. Hilary Curtis, Tony Holaghan, and Carey Jewitt (eds) (Pp 125; £15.00) Abingdon; Rodcliffe Medical Press, 1995. ISBN 1-85775-131-0.

This is a very clearly written, easy to read book whose stated aim is to provide 'a source of practical ideas and guidance for general practice teams who want to develop their role in enabling patients to adopt healthy fulfilling and responsible patterns of sexual behaviour'.

The chapters cover issues from sexual health promotion, (why, where, and when?) to ethical considerations, talking about sex, psychosexual problems, disabled people and sexual practice, contraception provision, management of sexually transmitted diseases, liaison and support services, providing condoms, audit and evaluation and professional development, counselling approaches to health promotion, and motivational skills.

In addition to using contributors with a wide range of experience in the sexual health care field from multi-disciplinary backgrounds, there are references and further reading sections as well as useful addresses. Many common problems and words are clearly defined and explained, as well as suggested useful phrases designed to introduce various sensitive topics into a general consultation setting for GPs and nurses.

This book is not a comprehensive guide to the issue of sexual health but concentrates on areas with which general practice teams should be familiar in order to effectively progress their health promotion activities.

Boxes throughout the book highlight practical guidance for history taking, ways to raise the issues of sex with patients, types of sexual activity, and their relationship to 'safe sex' practices, and developing guidelines for sexual history taking, including family planning and sexually transmitted disease histories. Provision of condoms within general practice is given a whole chapter to explore the ethical, practical, and theoretical issues which surround it.

Audit and evaluation is covered, albeit briefly, but it provides a pragmatic approach for primary health care teams. The weakest chapter is probably the last on professional development, which skims the surface and provides pointers for further training. Unfortunately, no specific guidance is provided on further reading in this area, or recommended training courses and materials.

The book is overall very general but provides a useful starting point for general practice teams. Should teams wish to develop their skills in particular areas in more depth further specialised texts would be required, along with further training. However, this book would take a practice team a long way down the path for starting and implementing sexual health promotion within a general practice setting. It is comprehensible to all members of the general practice team as it is not unduly laden with unexplained medical jargon, making it easily readable, clear, and pragmatic.

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