

BOOK REVIEWS

Atlas of leading and "avoidable" causes of death in countries of Central and Eastern Europe. P E Józán, R Prokhorskas, eds. (Pp 323; price not stated). Budapest: Hungarian CSO Publishing House, 1997. ISBN 963 215 146 1.

The east-west mortality gap and the rapidly changing pattern of health in eastern Europe have stimulated intense interest over the past decade. Most of the debate has, however, been at the level of countries even though it is clear that some pattern of diseases in eastern Europe would reflect historical boundaries more than the existing ones. For example, mortality in west Ukraine follows a pattern that is much more akin to that of southern Poland than that of east Ukraine. The *Atlas of leading and avoidable causes of death in countries of Central and Eastern Europe* gives us the rare, and valuable, opportunity to visualise mortality for the entire region at the sub national level. The atlas consists of sets of maps of life expectancy and mortality in all member states of the WHO European Region, down to the administrative subdivision of countries of eastern and central Europe. With most data presented in the book dating from 1989, it also gives us a snapshot of central and eastern Europe before the fall of the Iron Curtain and the disintegration of the former Soviet Union. While this is of much historical interest, clearly things have changed greatly so an update is now needed. The book would also benefit from presentation of data separately for men and women, especially as the gender gap in mortality in these countries is very large (above 10 years for many countries). Until a new edition appears, you can consult the document on WHO Europe web site (<http://www.who.dk/country/country.htm>).

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Guidelines for poison control. World Health Organisation. (Pp xii + 112; Sw fr 35; US \$31.50; in developing countries: Sw fr 24.50). Geneva: WHO, 1997. ISBN 92 4 154487 2

The massive growth in the availability and use of chemical products has had different consequences in health. This book, published by the World Health Organisation in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme and the International Labour Organisation, provides guidelines for the establishment or improvement of programmes for poison control. Nine chapters in 112 pages, presented in two parts, deals with the experiences of poison centres in different parts of the world.

The first part provides an overview of the policy issues surrounding the prevention and management of poisoning. Arguing that a poison information centre should be available in every country, it describes the benefits of such centres, outlines their principal functions and suggests various options for their logical and cost effective operation.

Part two provides technical guidance on how to organise a system for poison control. This part covers a wide range of topics such as the functions and requirements of information services, clinical services, and analytical toxicological and other laboratory services, and discusses the importance of toxicovigilance as a strategy for prevention. It explains how to deal with major emergencies involving toxic chemicals, and outlines solutions to the problem of obtaining essential antidotes. Also included is advice on the design and content of forms for collecting, storing, and reporting data, followed by a detailed list of the main documentary and library requirements: books, journals, publications of international organisations, computerised databases and educational material, indispensable for the work of a poison information centre.

Additional practical information is provided in a series of six annexes, which describe a computer software system for the management of poisons data (IPCS INTOX Package), examples of chemical records, and classify a large number of antidotes and related agents according to their proved effectiveness and urgency of availability.

I found the book easy to read, clearly written and presented, and it covers a wide range of topics and is useful for all those who are interested in the strategies for the prevention of poisoning.

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AIDS and men. Taking risks or taking responsibility? Martin Foreman, ed. (Pp 240; price not stated). London: The Panos Institute and Zed books Ltd, 1999. ISBN: 1870670 40X pb; 185649 7445 hb.

AIDS and men is a contribution of the Panos AIDS programme from the Panos Institute, which was founded in 1986, to stimulate the debate on global environment and development issues, particularly on the marginalised sectors of society. Funding for the Panos AIDS programmes comes from the Norwegian Red Cross, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and also from the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ford Foundation.

Since the programme's first publication, *AIDS and the Third World* (1986) Panos has provided information on the AIDS epidemics in many ways. Briefings and sheets were circulated worldwide. Other titles from Panos are *On the margins* by Neil McKenna (1996) about the relation between HIV and sex between men in the developing world. A forthcoming publication *The Silent Epidemic*, is a shorter and updated summary of the AIDS epidemic.

AIDS and men is a collective book. Their main message is about the limitation to consider women as a primary target of many AIDS prevention programmes. In fact, women are contracting HIV at a faster rate than men. Furthermore, women with the virus may pass it to their future children. Also, at home and in hospital, women assume greater responsibility for caring for the sick. But, most of these prevention programmes have little impact on the overall course of the epidemic. Perhaps because the men usually decide whether women can protect themselves and because men are more likely than

women to transmit the virus to others. Men determine the path of the disease. For that, we need prevention programmes that directly tackle men's sexual and drug taking behaviour to reduce the epidemic spreads.

The book is divided into two parts. The 50 pages of part one are an examination of the very relevant aspects, in the editor's opinion, of the evolution of the epidemic. As the author's conviction about the importance of men's behaviour in the spread of the epidemic, each of four chapters of this first part are considering specific issues. For instance, "Men, sex and HIV", explains the differences in sex behaviour between men and women and the role of the physical factors for contagion. But this part also includes some reflections on masculinity and virility ("What makes a man?"), about the factors on the female vulnerability despite the recent improvements in the status of women in many parts of the world, like smaller income than men or, still most important, their dependence on men in sexual activities; and lastly, a claim to "Changing men's behaviour".

The second part has been written by journalists from 11 countries (Ghana; Ivory Coast; Kenya; Malawi; Tanzania and Uganda from Africa, Brazil and Mexico from America, Bangladesh and Thailand from Asia, and Russia) to illustrate many different aspects of the relation between men's actions and AIDS—from machismo in Mexico to homosexuality in Kenya. These country reports share a humanistic approach as well as the goal to promote the discussion, at the local level if it is possible.

The book has great interest for public health practitioners because it offers an intersectorial picture on several aspects related to the AIDS prevention in men.

ANDREU SEGURA

Screening. Catherine Peckham, Carol Dezateux, eds. London: Royal Society of Medicine, 1998.

British Medical Bulletin 1998;54 (number 4) is an issue devoted to health screening and consists of 17 expert reviews on screening topics. The volume, entitled *Screening* is edited by Professor Catherine Peckham and Dr Carol Dezateux (Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, Institute of Child Health) who have compiled a series of excellent contributions.

The first contribution is by the editors and looks at the issues underlying screening programmes. Their thought provoking introduction raises many important but little recognised issues in screening and sets the scope and context for the rest of the book. They point out there has been an exponential rise in new screening programmes, reflecting rapid technological development and based on the assumption that early detection must be good. As the authors illustrate, this is not always true, and screening has the potential to do harm as well as good. For example, there is increasing recognition that people who receive false positive results may experience considerable anxiety, which may last even after follow up tests are negative. This introduction also highlights the need to base screening programmes on randomised trial evidence to avoid falsely concluding that screening is beneficial when, in fact, it is only detecting disease earlier, or detecting disease that would never have been clinically impor-

tant. They also raise the thorny issues of adequate informed consent for screening and screening for genetic mutations.

Many of these difficult questions are discussed in detail in later contributions. For example, there is a paper on communication and interpretation of risk that concisely reviews key psychological research and discusses it in the context of individuals having to make difficult [screening] decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Other topical themes picked up in subsequent papers are: screening for prostate cancer, screening for colorectal cancer, economic perspectives in screening, and ethical and legal issues in screening.

It is an excellent guide through this difficult and complex subject and would be a valuable resource for anyone working in the area.

ALEX BARRATT

Peer review in health sciences. F Godlee, T Jefferson, editors. (Pp 271; £30). London: BMJ Books, 1999. ISBN 0-7279-1181-3.

Reviewing a book on peer review is not without some degree of boldness, even more when one knows about some of the limitations of peer review. But it is precisely the increasing effort to “guard the guardians” that is largely summarised in this book, grouped under three main titles: how it is now and what we know, how to do it, and the future. Godlee and Jefferson, with the contribution of 28 other prominent editors of biomedical journals, researchers in the area of peer review and funders, succeed in pulling together the not always consistent evidence on the role of

peer review. The authors cover a broad variety of aspects, ranging from the state of the evidence about peer review, not only applied to editorial work but also to grant applications, including its effectiveness, as well as the biases that have been investigated, to innovative topics such as peer review and the pharmaceutical industry, and its role in small journals and non-English language journals. The chapters in part 2 are particularly useful for editors, reviewers and authors as they cover systematic approaches to the implementation of peer review systems, including statistical, economical and ethical aspects. The final part deals with some of the hottest issues in peer review, such as the role of internet and the use of systematic reviews as ways of improving the overall quality of the system, with two informative appendices on the so called Vancouver Group and the World Association of Medical Editors.

The main message of this book is twofold: the good news is that it shows that peer review, as a procedure to select and improve the best scientific evidence, is here to stay, although most probably in a more open and flexible manner, thanks to improvements in communications technology, most notably the internet. The bad news is that, as it is based on human judgement, a greater vigilance needs to be put on factors that may bias such judgement—the evidence is not always clear or, simply, is lacking—, such as author and reviewer identification, gender, seniority, and language, among many others. Although some readers—including myself—may not fully agree with D Rennie’s statement that “peer review is democracy” (page 11)—where are the voters and their votes?—,

but, rather, would prefer to consider it as an “illustrated” screening test that—with dissemination and time—will turn into a “democratic” diagnostic test, the best news is that this book shows that, since Stephen Lock’s seminal work *A difficult balance: editorial peer review in medicine* almost 15 years ago, the scientific community has been moving towards a more “evidence-based” role of peer review, providing a wealth of information that is nicely compiled and commented on in this book.

Editors, reviewers, funders and health science researchers at large, together with science sociologists and media experts should definitely use this book as a bedside tool, while awaiting the new evidence that will be presented at the incoming Fourth Congress on Peer Review in Biomedical Sciences in September 2001.

ANTONI PLASÈNCIA

NOTICE

Society for Social Medicine

The Annual Scientific Meeting will be held on the 13–15 September 2000 in Belfast. The deadline for receipt of abstracts is 10 March 2000. Contact the web site for further details: <http://www.dundee.ac.uk/socsocmed/>