

## BOOK REVIEWS

**The political economy of social inequalities: consequences for health and quality of life.** Edited by Vicente Navarro. (Pp 530; \$45.00). New York: Baywood, 2000. ISBN 0-89503-252-X

The value of this interesting study is somewhat reduced by the overtly political comments in many chapters. Had the politics been confined to an introductory preface, readers could have concentrated better on the substantial arguments of various authors that growing social inequalities in today's world exacerbate health inequalities and reduce the quality of life for poorer people, especially in developing countries. The sustained and telling criticisms of the health policies of the WHO, Unicef, World Bank and IMF merit examination.

Some of the best health chapters are: 7, where two Mexican professors of social medicine analyse critically the World Bank's approach to investing in health, arguing that the Bank sees this as a realm for privatisation and capital accumulation rather than controlled state expenditure; 10, where Debabar Banerji, professor of social medicine in New Delhi, offers a powerful global review of international and national health policies and deficiencies in many countries, including the unreasonably homogenised approaches to immunisation, AIDS and tuberculosis, and the heavy handed Malthusian family planning policies in India and China; and 12, on the proposed switch of Medicare funding in the US to the voucher system, offering a balanced critique of the arguments.

Most of the authors ignore the problem that in democratic societies the voters ultimately decide how much taxation they will accept for health and other services. In conversations with leading WHO figures in the mid-1980s, this reviewer was told of the yawning financial abyss that faced every

health system, with limitless demands and a limited tax base.

Rather than seeing the injustice of inequalities as deliberate capitalist ploys, attention should be given to new systems that can ensure greater equity. Chapter 15, by Richard Wilkinson, a research professor in the UK, offers one solution—that greater economic and industrial democracy could lead to a fairer allocation of resources.

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**An introduction to randomized controlled clinical trials.** J N S Matthews. (Pp 189; price not stated). London: Arnold.

This book sets as its aim to provide an introduction to the statistical methodology that underpins randomised controlled trials. It is intended for students of statistics (honours year and postgraduate) and takes a mathematical approach to the subject. The book covers most of the important features of the design and analysis of clinical trials, developing the necessary statistical theory. It also covers sequential methods, cross over studies and equivalence trials. However, survival analysis is omitted and the analysis of binary outcomes is only partially covered. The rationale for this may be that the author wanted to avoid a mathematical treatment of these topics: if so, a heuristic explanation may have been a better option. Despite this limitation the book achieves its aim, and has many excellent features. It expands on the theory by using worked examples that are based on real data. These are analysed using the package Minitab and helpful guidance is given on the commands used to conduct the analyses. However, the reader will be frustrated because the raw data on which the analyses are run are not included with the book. Another attractive feature is the inclusion of exercises at the end of each chapter, for which helpful solutions are provided at the end of the book. Overall, if you have a good grounding in statistics, this will be a very useful book.

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**Health futures. A handbook for health professionals.** M J Garrett. (Pp 320; US\$91.80). World Health Organisation, 1999. ISBN 92-4-154521-6

A highly recommended read for those who would seek a solid introduction to the discipline and methodology of undertaking a formal analysis of the future as it relates to public health. The futures approach is a well defined discipline that uses a range of tools to construct a scenario and vision of the future in order to give policy makers a long range perspective. It is targeted at public sector health service managers in developing countries, and assumes readers have no previous experience in the concepts and techniques of futures studies. The reader is given a comprehensive approach to developing scenarios that anticipate the future impact of demographic trends, new health care technologies, global climate change, newly emerging diseases, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the effect of market forces on access to essential drugs. Using these techniques will provide managers with the tools to break the pattern of habitual "crisis management", and motivate for action at the appropriate time.

The book has nine chapters. The first two cover an introduction to the concepts of futures, and give useful examples of futures projects in a variety of health care settings and countries. Chapters three to six describe the methodology of futures exercises: initiating and funding projects; using different designs; and the different tools to use. A useful section describes the use of computer software, models, and tool kits. Chapter seven gives a comprehensive review of the application of futures techniques to health. Chapters eight and nine provide details on printed and online information resources and a directory of health futures organisations, training courses and potential funding sources. A comprehensive glossary of new terms makes the book very accessible to novices.

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