

PostScript

BOOK REVIEWS

Global public health: a new era

Edited by R Beaglehole. Oxford University Press, 2003, pp 284, £29.50 (paperback). ISBN 0-19-851529-4

Plotting a roadmap for public health from the global to the national/local levels, and proposing strategies for strengthening public health in the 21st century is no small task. Indeed, this book sets out to address these rather daunting objectives. Such an ambitious and complex project is a potential minefield, in that the final product can turn out to be an incoherent and disconnected jumble. However, I am pleased to report that this book avoids such pitfalls. The different chapters, covering a representative range of expert views from developing and developed countries from all regions of the world, form a seamless analysis that is a pleasure to read. In fact, I was so totally engrossed with the subject matter of this book, that I carried it everywhere with me so that I could dive in to it whenever I had some spare time.

The first two chapters chart the global context and scope of public health and provide an overview of current global health status. The core of the book is comprised of nine chapters providing a summary for different countries and regions of the world of the trends in health status and the principal health determinants, as well as the policy implications and public health challenges for the various populations examined in these chapters. Three further chapters in the final segments of the book cover contemporary health challenge and opportunities: bioterrorism, ethical issues in global public health, and how to make public health a more people centred enterprise.

In the final chapter, public health veterans, Robert Beaglehole and Ruth Bonita, have drafted a unique and insightful chapter that ties together nicely the various strands of this book. Despite the daunting public health context of the 21st century, weaknesses in

public health infrastructures and the workforces, the double burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases, and the threats posed by globalisation the authors of this summary chapter are optimistic that a renaissance of public health may be just around the corner. However, for this to transpire the intrinsic multi-sectorality of public health must become a social and political reality: the ultimate goal of public health practitioners must be to ensure that public health is integrated into all health, economic, and social policies and programmes. For instance, the links between trade liberalisation and public health and poverty, particularly in developing countries, demonstrate that public health practitioners cannot ignore the activities and policies of other sectors. The fact that health has now crept its way up towards the top of the development agenda, and that new global funds for health have evolved in recent years bears testament to a "reasonably optimistic future" for public health improvement.

I am convinced that in time we will look back on this book as a public health classic. It brings together an armada of intellectual heavyweights in contemporary public health, and also manages to map out a way forward amid the unpredictable and tangled realities of public health in the early 21st century. The book presents a concise, logical, and practical template for navigating the potentially troubled waters that lie ahead of us in the world of contemporary public health.

Douglas W Bettcher

Under the banyan tree: a population scientist's odyssey

S Segal. Oxford University Press, New York, 2003, pp 242, £22.95. ISBN 0-19-515456-8

In retrospect the global demographic transition of the second half of the 20th century will probably be seen as the most important event of our time. Between 1950 and 2000 the life expectancy of people in developing countries

rose from 40 to 60 years and the resulting explosive growth of population was constrained only by a decline in family size (as measured by the total fertility rate) from over six to under three children. This was no accident and was largely the product of human intervention in the form of reproductive biological research, contraceptive development, and organised family planning culminating, especially in Asia and North Africa, in government national family planning programmes.

The person in the most pivotal position to take leadership and observe this vast human drama was Sheldon (Shelly) Segal, first with the Biomedical Division of the Population Council (where he became director), then as founding director of the Rockefeller Foundation's Population Sciences Program, and finally back with the Population Council as its Distinguished Scientist. His interests spanned the biomedical and social science fields, and his understanding was moulded by early experience in India.

The book is the product of its author's unique experience and his humane and humanistic liberal philosophy. He can become angry at actions and outlooks that contribute on ideological grounds more to misery, and especially unnecessary female suffering, than is necessary. In a series of linked essays he tells the story of the key reproductive research and contraceptive development with elegance and in a language that everyone can understand. This is embedded in analyses of population change and feeding the world. The reader will probably feel more anger than the author himself expresses at the way the American legal system can block such new developments as Segal's implant, Norplant. The book is produced in Oxford's careful and clear style. The only error I noticed was in attributing to me a statement about a positive (instead of a negative) relation between children's educational level and national fertility (on page 185) but even here the rest of the paragraph makes the intention clear.

John C Caldwell