

PostScript

BOOK REVIEWS

The changing face of disease: implications for society

Nick Mascie-Taylor, Jean Peters, Stephen T McGarvey, eds. Florida: Boca Raton, 2004, \$89.95, pp 208. ISBN 0-415-32280-4

The Changing Face of Disease is a collection of papers originally presented at the 43rd Society for the Study of Human Biology symposium. While underpinned by a human biology view of the world, the collection makes strides towards presenting arguments from a public health oriented, global burden of disease perspective. It is well targeted to human biologists who have an interest in the socioeconomic and political factors influencing their work.

The book has 23 contributors, 12 chapters, and is divided into two main parts: *Historical aspects* and *Current challenges*. It contains a list of the 20 figures, and another of the 15 tables. Nick Mascie-Taylor, Jean Peters, and Stephen T McGarvey have edited the book with a clear direction in mind. The introduction provides a backdrop to the evolution of the book, as well as a concise summary of the chapters. Locating the book within the human ecology perspective, the introduction grounds the chapters in the intent to provide a wide focused and nuanced understanding of the complexity of factors affecting human disease. For those unfamiliar with the perspective, the introduction provides a user friendly entrée. References are found at the end of each chapter. A thorough index completes the book.

The first three chapters, "Emerging disease in the third epidemiological transition", "Life history perspectives on human disease", and "The evolution, transmission and geographic spread of infectious diseases in human populations: questions and models" make up the *Historical Aspects* section. Issues of social and economic inequity and emerging disease are effectively interwoven from the outset. In the first chapter, Amargelos takes the reader from the first epidemiological transition through to the current complex state of affairs. Overall, the section provides a very useful introduction to ways in which long term views of disease, disease patterns, and human behaviours can illuminate our understanding of particular diseases or health patterns.

The second section, *Current Challenges*, contains a more diverse selection of topics. The chapters, vary from broad views of changes in public health, as in Peter's "The public's health: the changing role of public health", to the more specific disease oriented topics, as in Wareham's "Unraveling gene-environment interactions in type 2 diabetes". The contributions are international in nature, with topics ranging from health care in American Indians, to malaria in pregnant women in the Gambia, and HIV/AIDS in Central and Eastern European countries. What binds the selection elegantly together is the focus on embedding the research in the

broader view of human influences—whether it is in the form of population movement, trends in political, or sociocultural beliefs, or, as in "Urban pollution, disease and the health of children", the combined impact of collective human behaviour, choices, and the modern world. Most insightful, perhaps, is the piece by McGarvey *et al* that focuses on interdisciplinary research on *Schistosoma japonicum* and benefits from the insights of the diverse fields of biological anthropology, paediatrics, human epidemiology, health economics, immunology, human pathology, veterinary medicine, veterinary epidemiology, and internal medicine. The authors round off the chapter with the following challenge to themselves and the research community: "It is a truism in human population biology and health research that interdisciplinary perspectives will yield findings and insights greater than available within the individual disciplines. This truism is repeated here both as an admonition and a promise."

Perhaps the only jarring note is found in the final chapter, "Human behaviour and the changing pattern of disease". In attempting to offer up a contemplative review, the author instead presents a curiously Victorian perspective on the impact of modernity on microbiology. His use of terminology such as "unfettered sex" and "promiscuity", and reference to "the vogue for sexual freedom" undermine any belief in a balanced presentation of the variables affecting sexually transmitted diseases. While it seems he is attempting to make the point that the public should be more informed of the microbiological implications of the changes that have resulted from evolving human behaviours and trends, he unfortunately comes across as dated, judgmental and, ultimately, antimodernist.

The final chapter aside, the book is an effective introduction to the intricate linkages between human biological sciences and the wider socioeconomic and political influences. The broad range of topics presents the reader with a number of different perspectives on disease patterns, and ultimately serves as an invitation to delve further into the relation between human behaviours and their own area of specialty.

Shona Wynd

A history of epidemiologic methods and concepts

Edited by A Morabia. Basle: Birkhäuser Verlag, 2004, pp 405. ISBN 3-7643-6818-7

The editor of this book offers an original and thought provoking approach to the historical configuration process of what is known today as epidemiology. Although a greater effort at contextualisation would have been welcomed, framing the evolution of the epidemiological concepts and methods against that of public health itself, the various contributions compiled in this monographic work achieve the objectives set out by the editor in the introduction. This text is clearly intended for teaching purposes and, by way of an

antidote to dogmatism, seeks to offer the keys that will reinforce in the reader's mind the temporary nature of all scientific, and, of course, epidemiological knowledge.

In the first part (Epidemiology: an epistemological perspective), the editor analyses the main elements that, throughout the contemporary period (chiefly the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries), shaped epidemiological doctrine. Based around the contribution of epidemiological science to the study of the determining factors that condition the state of public health, Alfredo Morabia's work explains the main aspects of its methodology and concludes with a proposal of periodisation by illustrating the main stages in its process of institutionalisation.

The second part of the book (Collection of papers on the history of epidemiological methods and concepts), includes many of the papers presented at the workshop on *Measuring our Scourges*, held in Annecy (France) in July 1996. This is a compendium of essays, in which different authors offer their analyses of studies that have become classics in the field of epidemiology (from John Snow or William Farr to Karl Pearson), or reflect on some of the most important aspects of the epidemiological method (from problems of causality to issues related to confounding or bias). The inclusion of these essays is a fitting complement to the introductory outline in the first part.

Josep Bernabeu-Mestre

Health in the Americas

P A H O Scientific Publication no 587. Washington, DC: 2002. ISBN 92-75-31587-6. Available in paper and CD ROM.

This important publication of the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) analyses the health situation and trends in the region of the Americas. This edition, presented in two volumes in the centennial of PAHO, is the latest of this quadrennial publication. The accompanying CD ROM is in both English and Spanish languages.

The leitmotif of the first volume is inequalities in health throughout its eight chapters, presenting a regional perspective on the current health situation. Volume 1 describes the current status and trends in health promotion, environmental health, disease prevention and control, availability of health resources and technology, and external cooperation in health viewed in the context of globalisation, health sector reform, and other macro-political processes. The general changes and the main determinants of the evolution of general health indicators is discussed in Regional Health Analysis (chapter 1), in which instead of applying the widespread used Gini coefficient to analyse the influence of economy on health a comparison between the upper and lower quintiles of income is given. Macrodeterminants of health in sustainable human development is the objective of chapter 2. They are analysed using a human development index (combining life expectancy, literacy, and gross domestic product)

and taking into account well known facts such as globalisation, poverty, ethnicity, and sex. Chapter 2 covers the health system reforms undertaken in the region, emphasising the importance of public health functions. The promotion of health is analysed in chapter 4, where a collection of different actions carried out by municipalities and schools is given; it also looks at the main causes of morbidity and mortality by age groups, food and nutrition, and lifestyle. The influence of environment on health is offered in chapter 5, detailing water and sanitation, solid waste, housing, pesticide and

pollutants, and work conditions. Chapter 6 reviews prevention and control of common diseases in the region, giving vaccines a wide coverage. Chapter 7 is dedicated to health resources and technology, mainly focused in two points, provision of health care services and scientific production in health. The last chapter deals with the characteristics and trends of external cooperation in health, not only among countries of the region but also with international organisations (such as the World Bank and OECD) and other countries.

Volume 2 presents the most up to date health situation analysis for each of the 48

countries and territories of the Americas. A brief description of the health care organisation of each country is enclosed, detailing the main changes undergone during the past years.

The book is a useful tool for teachers in public health and every professional interested in what is happening around us, in a region where strong differences remain (even in areas that are close). Those concerned with health inequalities will find its reading stimulating with numerous examples.

María Sillero-Arenas

APHORISM OF THE MONTH

“Life is a mixture of risks, what would a risk-free life be like?—life is a process of selecting a cause of death”. (Lowell Levin)