Book Reviews


This monograph consists of presented papers and transcribed discussions from a 1989 conference on contemporary mortality among Australian Aborigines. The papers deal with mortality rates and causes at all ages, as well as with deaths in custody. They may be most appropriately classified as descriptive epidemiology and demography, for they record the higher rates of deaths of Aborigines than non-Aborigines. The causes that seem to be of greatest importance, and some of the factors that are associated with increased risk of death among Aborigines (e.g., low birth weight, lack of antenatal care, crowded housing).

The primary purpose of the conference was to document and describe the higher mortality of Aborigines than non-Aborigines. The conferees did this admirably. Despite inadequacies of data collection systems and the difficulties of identifying who is and who is not an Aborigine, the degree of agreement among so many different investigators collecting data in so many different places should convince even the most sceptical that major inequalities in life chances persist between Aborigines and non-Aborigines. Indeed, while none of the conferees made the point, it is in fact the case the life expectancy of Aborigines is far lower than it is for any of the indigenous people with whom they are most frequently compared: North American Indians and New Zealand Maoris.

While these descriptive studies make a compelling case for the persistence of major inequalities, in general they avoid explanatory analyses. Perhaps this is because as the editor, Alan Gray, said in one of the recorded discussions, ‘We recognize that the health standards of Aborigines are determined by the position of Aborigines in Australian society. We do not need really to expand on that very much because it is not just poverty, it is discrimination and a whole range of other things’ (p.193). If everyone knows that discrimination and poverty are the root causes of the problem, then exploring the causal relationships may be thought to be unnecessary. On the other hand, there are results here that cry out for explanation. Among the most striking are the surprisingly high rates at such surprisingly young ages of death from circulatory system diseases, and the epidemic increase in 1987 of suicides of Aboriginal men while in police custody.

It is in this connection that the recorded discussions were most interesting. Reading such discussions generally gives new meaning to the line my children use when describing what they seem to think was an exciting event: ‘you had to be there’. Like such allegedly exciting events, conferences lose a lot in the transcribing. That is not entirely the case here: not because the conversation was remarkably scintillating but because it was only in the discussions that there were attempts made to explain the observed phenomena or debate what might be done about them. And the differences of opinion were real: for example over the relevance and definition of the notion of ‘culturally appropriate’ services; over problems of identifying Aboriginality in numerator (death) and denominator (population) data; and over the impact of antenatal care on birthweight and perinatal mortality, to list but three.
However, it is important to emphasize that the major purpose of the conference – to make known the contemporary patterns of death among Aborigines and the continuing inequalities in life expectancy – was accomplished. Indeed, this monograph contains an enormous amount of material that should be of great value to all those concerned with the health and well being of Aborigines.

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This book is a collection of papers presented by the author in conferences as well as published and unpublished articles. It is therefore not a single volume on health and illness in Japan but several papers that address various health problems in Japan. It is in the light of this statement that the reader should assess the book. One major drawback in the presentation is that the author fails to provide an introductory chapter to link the various issues and ideas raised in the papers together. The preface failed to provide this linkage.

However, I found the book interesting in that it addresses the various health problems in a society that has gone through a rapid process of economic and technological development within a short period of time. It is a useful addition to its peers, particularly for those who do not speak the Japanese language. The paper on urbanization, health problems and solutions is illuminating. It demonstrates a close relationship between urbanization, the collapse of kinship and community ties and social disorganization on the one hand and changes in disease patterns on the other. The relationships are clearly shown in the tables and graphs presented in the paper. However, solutions to these problems are not properly articulated in the paper.

The second paper presents a lucid sociological analysis of changes in family formation, family relationship and conjugal ties. The author’s analysis of how the shift from a patrilocal extended-family system to a nuclear family has changed and made more flexible the statuses and roles of family members is important, particularly for the developing countries that are undergoing rapid process of urbanization and increase in industrial activities.

Health trends and problems of medical care are the major concern of the third paper. It demonstrates clearly that as a society becomes industrialized, the disease pattern changes rapidly from infectious and parasitic diseases to degenerative diseases. Similarly, the cost of medical care to the individual and the government goes up because of the long period of hospitalization and drugs. This relationship is well demonstrated in the paper.

The paper on health care for the elderly in Japan is important because of the ageing of the population and more importantly because of the breakdown in family ties. The comparison between Japan and the USA demonstrates the fundamental differences between preventive and curative approaches to medical care.

Changes in disease structures and perceptions of health care in Japan are the main focus of the paper on community health and medicine. It underscores the role of community in health care, particularly the ability to put pressure on government to make things happen.
The paper on traditional medicine discusses the growth of herbal medicine in Japan, particularly since the Japanese government’s approval in 1976 of health insurance coverage for about 60 kinds of Chinese herbal medicines. The differences between urban and rural areas in health-seeking behaviour are important for health intervention programs. The major defect of the presentation in the paper is that adequate explanations are not offered for unusual patterns of behaviour.

The paper on socially induced diseases is interesting. It demonstrates two important things: that human activities (the technology and the social systems produced by people) could be direct causes of certain diseases, and the issue of social justice. It is also fascinating to read from this paper how people react differently to contagious diseases, degenerative diseases and diseases inflicted on the people by human activities; war, atomic bombs and accidents.

The paper on three medical sociological studies presents the results of three different surveys on smoking, health checkups and reliance on medications. The presentation is lucid and useful for health intervention programs.

The roles of the different types of mass media are discussed in the paper on the role of CATV and other communications media in health education. It is an important contribution in the area of health education.

The last paper concentrates on an historical review of the work done on health by scholars with sociology backgrounds or those who employed sociological methods. The paper will be useful for scholars and readers interested in the history of the developments in the study of health and diseases in Japan.

In my judgement the book is a useful collection in a field where very little is known. I recommend it to readers in the field of health, social sciences and related disciplines.

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The authors of these three books discuss health issues in Africa take the point of view that Western medical models and explanations of disease are inadequate for treating illness in an African setting. Underlying this view is a critique of Western medicine and of the racial implications of certain types of medical research. In response, suggestions for adapting traditional African medical techniques are proposed. While these views and objectives are understandable in light of the African colonial experience (two of the authors being from South Africa), the sometimes vague substantiation of their arguments undermines their efforts. Nonetheless, all three books are important reminders that social as well as political relations are embodied in the interpretation of symptoms and in the recommendation of therapies.

In Traditional Healers, Dr. Gumede argues for the integration of traditional medical practice along with Western medical techniques. After two brief (and rather general) introductory chapters on the historical background of traditional medicine, the author discusses Zulu beliefs about disease and affliction (Chapters 3-8) which are fascinating in their detail. His own personal anecdotes, as a District Surgeon in Mapumulo, South Africa, give a sense of the continued importance of traditional medical practice and of the persistence of certain ideas about the causes of illness. In Chapters 9 to 14, he discusses the work of diviners, traditional healers and birth practitioners, while in the remaining eight chapters he considers both the differences between traditional and Western health systems and their complementarity. In Chapters 17 and 18 he examines the impact of Christianity on beliefs about health and its implications for changes in health-related behaviour.

The integration of Western and traditional medicine in contemporary African therapeutic practice is also proposed by L.S. Funani in her discussion of male circumcision among the Xhosa-speaking people of South Africa. Ms. Funani does not oppose this practice but rather suggests procedures to eliminate the possibility for infection (sepsis) resulting from unsterilized equipment, inexperienced practitioners and inadequate care after circumcision. In particular, she recommends a system of registration of the surgeons and guardians of each circumcised initiate. Further, all procedures should take place in traditional circumcision lodges in which basic standards of cleanliness are maintained. The importance of continuing to use circumcision lodges is emphasized by the author who notes that, ‘Hospital circumcision is a medical procedure, not a culturally significant event in a man’s life’ (Funani 1990:56). Her point is that traditional medical practices have a value distinct from Western medical practices carried out in hospitals.

While the author of the final book under review also questions aspects of Western medicine, he is less than sanguine about the ability of traditional healers to deal with the AIDS epidemic, the subject of his book.

The book consists of seventeen chapters in which various aspects of the AIDS epidemic in the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa are examined. He discusses the biological aspects of AIDS, including brief explanations of the immune system, the AIDS virus and viral transmission, as well as the symptoms and social effects of AIDS. In the final four chapters he assesses strategies for AIDS
control both in Africa and abroad, stressing the need for increased governmental action, public education and changes in social practices which contribute to the transmission of the AIDS virus.

Unlike the two other authors whose criticism of Western medicine is related to its dismissal of traditional medical knowledge, Dr. Agadzi focuses instead on medical research, specifically, research attributing the origin of AIDS to Africa. He discusses his own hypothesis, that AIDS originated in the West, though he ultimately observes that the origin of the AIDS epidemic remains unknown. Whether one agrees with his argument or not, this book provides insights into the ways in which some Africans, educated and non-educated, view the AIDS epidemic.

While their tone is often polemical, these books reflect a genuine desire on the part of the authors to seek solutions to the problems of medical care in their own countries.

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