



Book Review

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The Power of Plagues

By Irwin W. Sherman

Washington, DC: ASM Press (2006)

431 pp., illustrated

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In the preface to *The Power of Plagues*, the author lays out the book's three objectives: 1) "to place infectious disease in a historical context..."; 2) "to describe the nature and evolution of diseases..."; and 3) "to show how the past can prepare us for future epidemics with infectious diseases."

The author does a nice job of presenting the historical, societal and cultural aspects of key epidemic diseases (six plagues of antiquity, bubonic plague, AIDS, cholera, typhus, malaria, smallpox, syphilis, tuberculosis, leprosy, six plagues of Africa and emerging plagues) and devotes one of the book's 17 chapters (Chapter 16) to noninfectious plagues (pellagra, beriberi, scurvy and rickets) that resulted from dietary (micronutrient) deficiencies.

In Chapter 2 (*Plagues, the Price of Being Sedentary*), the author describes how a sedentary lifestyle contributed to disease spread and plague when hunter-gatherers settled down and became farmers. Chapter 11 (*The Plague Protectors*) provides an interesting overview of first uses of antiseptics, anesthesia and antimicrobial drugs.

The author disappoints in his objective to describe the nature and evolution of diseases. The description of the causes of disease outbreak and the dynamic and multifactor interaction between host, disease agent and environment are one-dimensional and undeveloped. The author also disappoints in his objective to show how the past can prepare us for future epidemics. He provides very limited description of successful disease eradication campaigns of the past.

In the preface, the author states that the text is intended to be accessible to readers with no scientific background. While some comprehensive concepts are explained effectively using creative analogies, there is considerable scientific and medical language used throughout the text. The inclusion of a glossary of terms would have benefited the non-scientific reader.

Although there are some factual inaccuracies related to antivirals, BCG vaccination and historical material, *The Power of Plagues* is, for the most part, very readable and enjoyable. Individuals with an interest in the history of epidemic diseases or who have an interest in history (with a little smattering of anthropology thrown in) will find this text entertaining reading. The reader will also become familiar with terms such as "high-tech cannibalism" and "fatal brain plague."

WHO Releases Action Plan to Increase Pandemic Influenza Vaccine Supply and Guide for Collecting, Preserving and Shipping Specimens for Diagnosis of H5N1

At the end of September, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a new report, "Global pandemic influenza action plan to increase vaccine supply." The action plan was developed by a consensus of the world's experts in influenza, immunization, vaccine research, and manufacturing. The report can be downloaded by going to: www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/influenza/WHO_CDS_EPR_GIP_2006_1/en/index.html

The WHO also released a guide for field operations called, "Collecting, preserving and shipping specimens for the diagnosis of avian influenza A (H5N1) virus infection." The Guide can be downloaded at: www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/surveillance/WHO_CDS_EPR_ARO_2006_1/en/index.html