

Book review by:

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Title: Plagues, Products and Politics: Emergent Public Health Hazards and National Policymaking

Author: Christopher H. Foreman, Jr.  
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The past two decades have been notable for the number and diversity of what the author terms, appropriately, newly emergent public health threats. They range from AIDS and Lyme disease to toxic shock syndrome, the Dalkon Shield problem, cyanide-laced capsules of Tylenol and many others. Characteristically, each represented a novel hazard and, on emergence, was associated with considerable uncertainty as to the extent to which it might spread (infectious agents) or the extent to which the population had been or might be exposed (hazardous products). How each was detected and the nature and efficacy of the interventions applied is insightfully presented and critiqued in this well researched and referenced book. The book's ultimate value, however, derives from a perceptive discussion of scenarios and outcomes and how these related to the complex play of diverse political forces, the technological and historical imperatives of the different agencies involved, as well as the influence of the media, Congress and interest groups on the process.

Different chapters discuss, respectively, the principal players and institutions and their special foibles, the process for detection of newly emergent problems and various approaches to intervention, including special chapters on education, regulation and research.

The book concludes with a chapter on the prospects for dealing with future problems. As the author points out, there are two fundamental but inseparable approaches for dealing with emergent public health hazards. The first is to anticipate the problem and so prevent the problem before damage occurs. The second is to develop a capacity for response (resilience) so that unanticipated dangers can be more quickly dealt with after they become manifest. As the author points out, there are serious limits in our ability to forecast problems and thus, anticipatory measures are necessarily limited. Regulatory and other measures to diminish the probability of emergent problems can and do play roles, but the costs of such efforts and the regulatory burdens necessarily require that a balance be struck somewhere between oppressive restraint and laissez-faire observation.

The author makes his strongest case for a far more energetic and better funded program of surveillance in order to permit the earliest possible detection of significant problems and the most rapid and effective possible response. He sees this initiative as having a strong technical justification and bipartisan political support but perhaps failing because of general public indifference.

This is an exceptionally well-written, thoroughly well-documented and balanced reference which deserves the serious consideration of all who are concerned with public health policy and especially those who are now taking a heightened interest in the threats

posed by emerging infections. My only disappointment with the book was its failure to describe in any detail why present surveillance systems are functioning so inadequately as they are and, likewise, a suitably detailed elaboration of what could be done to strengthen the system. It is clear that additional resources for surveillance without more effective and more imaginative national and international leadership is unlikely to effect significant change.