a debate which was thought necessary to influence the moral and other judgements about the future of variola in the subsequent chapter (thereby inducing heartsink rather than anticipation). However, in the next chapter, entitled ‘Smallpox as a Biological Weapon’, smallpox hardly gets a mention. Instead we have the history of biological warfare from classical Indian times (1500–500BC), lists of potential bioagents and toxins, and the differentiation between biological and chemical agents being described in great detail. The inclusion of Sir Anherst, the British Commander-in Chief in North America, who suggested fomite spread of smallpox to Native Americans via contaminated blankets meant that smallpox did get a mention. However, interestingly, Koplow casts doubt on the fact this act was consummated.

The chapter on Environment Law and Policy was hard going, especially since Koplow states that ‘none of these legal tools is directly relevant to the novel question of preservation or destruction of the smallpox virus’. This was enough to lose the smallpox enthusiast.

However, the chapter on the World Health Organization was a high point. The recent co-operation and co-ordination of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta and the Russian State Research Centre of Virology and Biotechnology near Novosibirsk, the two laboratories which officially hold the virus, are outlined. Koplow discusses the politics and debates around repeatedly setting deadlines for the destruction of smallpox and highlights very well the problems in getting a consensus decision from member countries with very different agendas at different time points. The first deadline for destruction was 31 December 1993, and several subsequent deadlines turned out to be non-events. In May 2002, the World Health Assembly reluctantly accepted that there was no ‘final’ target date for destruction of variola. The Bush administration, declaring that post-September 11 2001 it would not proceed with destruction of the virus until researchers had accomplished a series of demanding objectives and the Russians’ concurrence with this view, made this announcement inevitable. The WHO cannot compel the US or Russia to conform to its restrictions, decisions, and timetable for variola research and elimination. It can only issue recommendations, requests, and guidance. As Koplow points out, ‘while the United States and Russia cannot always dictate the WHO’s course of action, the fact that they are the most powerful protagonists—and especially that they continue as physical custodians of the only known, WHO-sanctioned stocks of variola virus—grant them the leading roles’.

So what does Koplow come up with in his recommendations—extermination or retention of variola? I am afraid you will have to read the book.

Reference


DILYS MORGAN

DOI: 10.1093/ije/dyg250

Studying Populations: Simplifying Epidemiology Teaching and Learning

It is not a secret that an introductory epidemiology course may be a difficult subject to teach and to learn. Studying Populations is a computer-assisted learning package for epidemiological methods, suitable for anyone working in health sciences including medical students, Masters students, public health practitioners, and clinicians. Its aim is to make basic epidemiology education