
If your work includes planning to organise at community level this book is a useful guide. Covering the issues commonly faced in practice yet seldom written about, its span ranges from the field of information gathering and needs assessment to forecasting, planning, and evaluation. Written primarily as a guide for social work practitioners in the United States, much of the content is relevant for those working for public health.

Each section begins with a detailed theoretical introduction to the area, including relevant research, followed by a set of questions for discussion, description of group activities, and suggestions for further reading.

The early sections on practice models and power analysis provide interesting perspectives, but the book came alive for me in the later sections, which offered clear and practical advice on topics such as raising funds and grant writing.


This book was published in 2001 and it seemed a little odd to be asked to review it now. However, the passing of time allows an assessment of how well it continues to serve its intended purpose—namely to provide practical advice and background knowledge for those working in the field of communicable disease control. The answer is that it is not very effective. This is largely because of the unpredictable emergence of new infections and major re-structuring of services in the UK that have occurred over the last few years. Thus SARS is inevitably not discussed in the book. West Nile virus is cited in just one line in a table. More importantly the creation of the Health Protection Agency in England with the associated changes in the administrative structure and responsibilities for all health professionals makes much of the text in this area redundant. All these highlight the necessity for updating such practical handbooks very frequently—something that perhaps could only be attained by a web-based publication.

It is sympathetic in recognising the sheer intensity of effort required in seeking funding and there is a sense of realism in describing the barriers to success. Among a wealth of details, there are some nuggets of fascinating information: only 3% of the $13.8 billion in contributions provided by private foundations goes to organisations concerned with social justice, and 80–95% of all proposals made by not-for-profit organisations to funding foundations are rejected. This fact may perhaps extend some consolation to those people whose funding proposals are initially unsuccessful.

The section on maximising the benefits of the internet explains how organisations can use it for conducting research, locating legislation, lobbying decision makers, and recruiting constituents.

Of less relevance to readers outside the United States are the detailed descriptions and analyses of legislation.

General readers might easily be put off by the focus on social work. There are detailed references to professional codes of conduct.

And some have made contestable claims that only social workers have ethical values, such as social justice and community action, at the heart of what they do. The statement that it is the social worker (alone?) who has the responsibility to make sure that all groups, especially those who are oppressed, have access to resources and the absence of any reference to the relationship between social work, social action and health represents a missed opportunity—an opportunity for the author to make the case for greater multidisciplinary working between groups who share common values and objectives.

This is a book which bridges the gap between theory and practice in community organisations. It would make a useful teaching guide, with each of the chapters offering material for separate seminars.

Its strength lies in its comprehensive account of the skills needed for social change, although the wealth of information and dense layout may deter a faint hearted reader.

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Ignoring these problems, let us consider the overall structure of the book. It has a section on basic concepts in epidemiology and control, which amounts to just seven pages. This is a highly rudimentary treatment of the topic and even has errors—for example, it refers to the time between peaks in a propagated epidemic as estimating the incubation period rather than the serial interval (which is not even mentioned). Vaccination is not included as a universal precaution. This is followed by a section with advice on syndromic presentations—meningitis, gastrointestinal infection, community acquired pneumonia, etc., which is very helpful and of clear practical assistance to the practitioner. The following organism specific section in contrast adds nothing to the classic work on Control of Communicable Diseases in Man, originally edited by Benenson. The remaining sections on services and organisations have been overtaken by change but are also highly parochial—they largely apply only to England. This contrasts with the stated aim that this is a book for Europe. The one concession to Europe is a brief chapter outlining procedures in some European countries—a very narrow definition that does not include central or eastern Europe. One wonders to what extent this information has been overtaken by time as well.

The only references in the book are to other books—there is no reference to primary publications. So if this was intended to be evidence-based practice the evidence is invisible.

In summary what purports to be a practical handbook for Europe on communicable disease control was probably only really useful to health professionals in some parts of the UK. Much of this utility has been overtaken by time and this is essentially a historical document that highlights the need for up-to-date information being available electronically across Europe. The slim sections relating to chemicals and radiation in the volume need expansion in what needs to be a handbook for health protection. The challenge is to constantly update the information and to involve all our fellow Europeans in making it comprehensive.

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