
The break-up of the Soviet Union and the change of regimes in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe around 1990 had significant consequences for health and health services in these parts of the world. This in turn led to a rise in research in these areas. Initially this research was centred around the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in collaboration with scientists from the countries involved and was primarily financed by grants from NGO foundations, such as The Soros Foundation. Eventually, this work became an integral part of the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, which is now behind the production of the present book. Just one on a long list of highly relevant publications on health services.

The editors start the first chapter of this magnificent book by the following sentence: 'This book is about countries undergoing rapid political, economic and social transition.' True, many of the well-presented examples in subsequent chapters deal with infectious diseases (notably tuberculosis, HIV and diphtheria) in such countries. Some of the cases clearly show negative consequences for spread or re-emergence of communicable diseases due to collapse of health service structures, but some of the historical stories illustrate the devastating effects on society of major plagues. Other highly relevant chapters deal with general aspects of microbiology and infectious diseases, including the emergence of new microbial threats and increasing drug resistance. Further chapters deal with the significance of the structure of health and public health services, both national and international, in controlling communicable diseases.

It is worth noting that not only countries as those mentioned above, and others in Latin America, are undergoing transitions. Also, apparently slight changes may have consequences for the control in countries with traditionally well-organized public health control systems. Also these countries may experience new threats: The former Chief Medical Officer for England, Sir Donald Acheson, has in his fascinating memoirs ‘One Doctor’s Odyssey; The Social Lesion’ (2007) described ‘The seven Plagues’, all new or re-emerging infectious diseases, which he had to deal with during his tenure. Following 11 September, letters containing white powder, suspected/alleged to be anthrax spores, were received at important addresses in the United States and my own country requiring urgent response from local and central public health authorities. Luckily in Denmark no anthrax spores were detected. Sir Donald’s autobiography also demonstrates the importance of establishing and retaining a stable and confident collaboration between the responsible politicians and a well-informed and active public health authority, which presents well-documented advice to the political level.

The increasing private health sector in many countries of western Europe, including my own, may decrease the coverage and reliability of the surveillance of infectious diseases, unless the private sector apply the traditional high notification compliance of the public health sector and the public health authority follow-up appropriately. If not, the national surveillance will suffer and in turn the international credibility and coverage of surveillance and hence coordinated action worldwide.

In the last chapter, the editors and Ana Mensua take us on a fascinating and most ridiculed statement by Donald Rumsfeld (2002) on the uncertainties of the Iraq war:

‘As we know, there are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don’t know we don’t know.’

The authors of the chapter find it appropriate to take up this statement and use it constructively in relation to control of communicable diseases.

Known knowns deal with the relationship between health systems, hosts, agents, and environment, which could be exemplified by antimicrobial resistance.

Known unknowns deal with predicting future challenges.

The existence of Unknown unknowns calls for establishing a health system capable to deal with the unexpected in a rational manner.

This is an excellent book, well-written and well-documented. The editors have succeeded to bring together a large number of knowledgeable authors to cover comprehensively the vast area, with few overlaps. Dr Szusza Jakab, Director, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control states in the Foreword of the book ‘...The mutual interest at all countries— rich, poor or middle income—in fighting infectious diseases has never been more apparent...’ I agree totally and would like to add that this book will provide a most needed background for winning this fight. Hence, public health actors dealing with infectious diseases both at central and local level, whether in research, teaching or practice as well as professionals working in diagnostic and therapeutic health services, notably in microbiology and infectious diseases could greatly benefit from reading the book. Politicians and lay administrators with responsibility in the field would be well advised to do the same.


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