Book Reviews


This volume aims to remedy the lack of comprehensive information on health and migration, and how the topic can best be addressed by health systems. This highly ambitious venture is a product of collaboration between the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, the European Public Health Association Section on Migrant and Ethnic Minority Health and the International Organization for Migration.

The book consists of seven sections and 16 chapters, written by authors working in 18 countries in Europe and The United States (USA).

In an introductory chapter, it is pointed out that Europe’s increasingly diverse population poses new challenges for health systems, which need to be made more sensitive to the new situation. It has been estimated that in 2009, excluding naturalized migrants and irregular or undocumented migrants, citizens of countries outside the European Union (EU) made up 4.0% of EU’s population. There are four challenges: (i) the EU’s migrant population is larger than the Eurostat data indicate; (ii) the EU countries do not all adhere to the United Nations (UN) definition of migrants; (iii) the health of migrants’ descendants is sometimes better than their own; and (iv) there is a lack of comprehensive information on various aspects of health and migration, and how they can best be addressed by health systems.

Migrants, compared with non-migrant populations in general in EU countries, seem to be more vulnerable to communicable diseases, occupational diseases and poor mental health. The causes are partly connected with patterns of disease in their countries of origin, poor living conditions, precarious employment and traumatic life events. Regarding non-communicable diseases, migrants to EU countries may initially have a lower risk of cancer but a higher risk of diabetes and some other diseases, whereas the risk of cardiovascular disease varies between groups. Migrants are at a higher risk of maternal and child health problems, and both the utilization and the quality of antenatal care are lower among migrant women. The epidemiological profiles of migrants tend to converge towards those of the host country; they are affected by migrants adopting the same lifestyle and encountering the same environmental risks. Migrants seek help in primary health care to a similar extent as non-migrant populations.

The Council of the EU outlined minimum standards in 2003 for the reception of asylum seekers (including emergency care, essential treatment of illness and necessary medical or other assistance for applicants with special needs). Reality differs from those standards, and the situation is worst for undocumented migrants.

The editors hope that the book will be of value to researchers, policy makers and practitioners. However, to prevent social exclusion of migrants and other social and economic disadvantaged groups, EU policies need to be evidence- and culturally sensitive-based, transparent and regularly followed up. Relevant and useful tools for such comprehensive collaborations, including the target group (empowerment), will hopefully be outlined by the authors in the next book.

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This book provides a historical, philosophical and practical guide to the right to health in international law. Going back as far as Aristotle’s decree ‘men . . . have an absolute right to such measure of good health as society and society alone is able to give them’ through to the declaration of independence, and the WHO constitution ‘The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights . . .’, the introduction of the book describes the right to health in international law as the product of a social process.

In the second part, the meaning for the right to health is examined (chapter 3). In international law, all human rights are subject to interpretation, both textual and implementation-wise. In the case of the right to health, this controversy is more acute due to the lack of an authoritative body with coercive powers. This interpretation is also a major problem in the right to the highest attainable standard of health and even further in the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (chapter 4). The author describes the entitlement to a right to health as only one dimension of this right. In chapters 5–9, he continues with the other dimension being the obligations imposed upon states to respond to the claims of the right to international health.

The general obligation to recognize the right to health by all appropriate means is described in chapter 5. This general obligation is not limited to legislative actions, but includes national health plans, effective accountability and the collection of appropriate data. Chapter 6 addresses the progressive obligation to realize the right to health, which can be seen both as strength and weakness of this right, as it focuses on the availability of resources to implement the right to health. Chapter 7 goes one step further and looks at specific measures needed to secure the right to health. Taking into account local sensitivities in implementing the obligations, states do have to adopt the necessary measures to contribute to the effective realization of the right to health. The author stresses the importance of a collaborative process here that includes partnerships with vulnerable groups and practitioners. Only then will the international right to health be translated into an evolving set of clear and practical measures that will contribute to their effective realization. Chapter 8 addresses the important obligation to abolish traditional practices harmful to health. This obligation goes beyond judicial and legal protection and includes the need for a culturally sensitive and collaborative approach. Chapter 9 deals with the international obligation to secure the right to health, which is an essential right, but still open to ambiguity and interpretation.

The goal of this book is to shed light on the current state of the right to health in international law. And it has successfully done so. The current
state, however, is still far from ideal and will occupy international human rights and health lawyers as well as individuals and states for many more years. This book contributes as a comprehensive reference for continuing our efforts.

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