BOOK REVIEWS

From the Editor: The First Epidemiology Textbook?—Continued

In the October 1 issue of the Journal, when your Editor pontificated about “the first epidemiology textbook,” he fortuitously appended a question mark to the title of his commentary (1). Thus, he may be excused for misstating the case for the priority of Major Greenwood’s Epidemics and Crowd-Diseases: An Introduction to the Study of Epidemiology (2). More importantly, that editorial note stimulated the two extended commentaries by Bracken (3) and Lilienfeld (4) which follow. These carefully crafted book reviews, augmenting your Editor’s previous comments, provide Journal readers with a quite comprehensive examination of this important phase of the development of epidemiologic theory and practice.

REFERENCES

Warren Winkelstein, Jr.
School of Public Health
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720

The First Epidemiologic Text

No doubt when Dr. Warren Winkelstein (1) proposed Greenwood’s Epidemics and Crowd-Diseases (2) as the first epidemiology textbook, he was expecting, even hoping, to be trumped by someone with earlier references. Here are some possible candidates.

Greenwood himself published an earlier work in 1932, Epidemiology, Historical and Experimental, which was published jointly by the Johns Hopkins University Press and Oxford University Press (3). Even earlier contenders for the first epidemiology textbook include: The Principles of Epidemiology by Clare Oswald Stallybrass, published in 1931 (4), which focuses on infectious disease but includes discussions of statistical issues and causality using Koch’s postulates; Epidemiology, Old and New by Sir William Hamer, a 1928 publication (5)—although one might argue that this is an account of descriptive epidemiology and not really a textbook; Epidemiology and Public Health: A Text and Reference Book for Physicians, Medical Students and Health Workers by Victor Clarence Vaughan, published in 1922 (6); and Epidemiology: or, the Remote Cause of Epidemic Disease in the Animal and in the Vegetable Creation: with the Causes of Hurricanes, and Abnormal Atmospheric Vicissitudes by John Parkin, published in 1873 (7).

The chapters in this book include consideration of “The Doctrine of Contagion” and “Analysis of Modern Theories.” The first reference to the term “clinical epidemiology” may be in the textbook of that title written by Yale professor John Rodman Paul in 1958 (8). Interestingly, in the second edition of the book, a Yale colleague, Alvan Feinstein, is acknowledged for his assistance in preparing that text. Feinstein would go on to write his own texts in clinical epidemiology.

Textbooks in classical times were rare. One of the first Roman texts in obstetrics and gynecology was written in the second century CE by the unfortunately named (for an obstetrician) Soranus, who had nothing to say about perinatal epidemiology (9). Hippocrates’ “Airs Waters Places,” written around 400 BCE, is often considered the first epidemiologic text, but this may be the least scientific of his treatises, and books 1 and 3 offer more objective accounts of epidemiology (10). Hippocrates’ “Epidemics,” books 2–7, have been most recently translated but are primarily clinical case histories, although book 6, chapter 7, offers insights into a “cough” epidemic at Thasos (11). Interestingly, Wesley Smith, the recent translator of Hippocrates, tells us that the word “epidemics” in Greek means “visits,” which “may refer to the itinerant physician’s visits to the towns in which he practices, or more likely to the visitations of diseases in those communities” (11, p. 1). Writing even earlier, around 430 BCE, Thucydides gives an interesting account of the plague epidemic in Athens (12, book 2, chapters 47–54). All consid-