

Book Reviews

Hospital Infection Control. Setting up a Cost-effective Programme. SHAHEEN MEHTAR.
Pp. 190. Oxford University Press; 1992. £14.95. ISBN 0 19 262033 9.

Infection control has emerged as an important issue in the running costs of hospitals around the world. Not only is there the problem of patient morbidity and occasional mortality, but the risk of epidemic infection is ever present within the 'captive' and often severely immunocompromised patient. Dr Mehtar is well known for her knowledge, wisdom and teaching skills in the area of infection control practice. In this short book she distills much of her common sense approach to the whole range of infection control issues.

The book is divided into three sections which focus on infection control policy, the actual policies and the pragmatic aspects of dealing with infection. Chapter 2 provides a useful review of the economics of infection control, which I found particularly helpful in arguing the case for staff and facilities. The structure and function of the Infection Control Committee is carefully discussed and leads neatly into the specifics of policies and waste disposal. Practical advice is offered with regard to procedures such as the insertion and care of intravenous devices and urinary catheters, while antibiotic policies are not ignored.

Isolation policies are divided into categories A–C, which I find less helpful than the use of descriptive terms (enteric, respiratory, wound etc.). The emphasis placed on routine warm detergent washing of walls after a period of isolation care smacks of ritual. Curiously there appears little discussion of the use of masks, which are even omitted from the index. The advice concerning needle stick management is sound, apart from perhaps favouring the use of Zidovudine for the HIV-exposed, where efficacy remains unsubstantiated. Outbreak management is well described, although curiously there is no mention of the role of the Consultant in Communicable Disease Control. Finally, the disinfection of endoscopy equipment is only briefly touched on and could be strengthened.

This is a very practical manual. It contains the essential information required by all microbiologists, especially those in training, and all members of the Infection Control Team. It is also a valuable reference source for nursing staff working within High Dependency Units, as well as general ward areas, CSSD and theatre staff, domestic supervisors and other managerial personnel. At £14.95 it provides excellent value for money.

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Geographical and Environmental Epidemiology: Methods for Small-Area Studies.

P. ELLIOTT, J. CUZICK, D. ENGLISH & R. STERN, eds. Pp. 382. Oxford University Press, on behalf of the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe; 1992. £45.

There has been a growth in interest in epidemiological studies of disease 'clusters' and the subject has had a high profile due to the nuclear plant and cancer debate. This book gives a comprehensive account of current epidemiological thinking and is aimed at a wide audience because of the many disciplines involved. The book describes applications of familiar epidemiological techniques and the development of new ones. For example simple disease mapping is described as are the enhancements from computer Geographical Information Systems. Methodologies have been developed to get the best out of available data and suggestions are given for trying to collect better information.

It is good to see plenty of reminders of the caution needed in making interpretations. There are clear accounts of the limitations of much of the data used, the problems of trying to determine histories of exposure to postulated environmental hazards in a mobile population. Practical considerations such as confidentiality become relevant when very small subdivisions of a population are used. There is no single solution for study design and analysis. Various statistical approaches are suggested which try to disentangle the coincidental from the possible associations which are worthy of further investigation. Methods are described for studies of fairly large areas and others concentrate on finely divided populations. The theory is often complex but there are plenty of well-presented examples.

This volume followed a scientific meeting organized by the WHO. There are additional, invited chapters from non-participants. The book is an excellent compilation of contributions from more than fifty authors. The editors have done a commendable job in ensuring a cohesive structure and remarkably consistent style. They either employed a firm control or were lucky in the selection of authors, or both.

The final sections of the book give case studies and these make fascinating reading. They all involve chronic diseases but it is not inconceivable that communicable disease epidemiologists might need to apply these methods to study, for example, rare illnesses thought to be infections of unknown source or diseases which remain endemic for unexplained reasons. This book is recommended as essential reading to anyone embarking on such a study, and as general interest reading to others.

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Teaching Epidemiology. What you should know and what you could do. JOHN OLSEN & DIMITRIOS TRICHOPOULOS, eds. Pp. 340. Oxford University Press; 1992. £40.00. ISBN 0 19 262205 6.

This book is a response to the expansion in the teaching of epidemiology. It is not aimed at teachers on established specialist courses but rather the organizers of in-service training or undergraduate teaching. Epidemiology is filtering through to many disciplines, as is confirmed by the great variety of topics covered such as dental, cancer, psychiatric, AIDS and occupational epidemiology and epidemiology in health services research. It begins with chapters on basics such as designing studies and applying statistics.

The book has been written by a committee, with individual members contributing a chapter on their topic. Much of it is informative. Most of it is readable with the exception of Chapter 3, written by the editorial board and entitled 'Principles of epidemiology'. This is inevitably full of technical terminology but the explanations are not in plain English and the reviewer found it hard to follow and felt it exemplified how not to teach. If this criticism encourages readers to rush out and buy the book in order to demonstrate their superior intellect than I hope the publishers will be duly grateful.

Some chapters are compiled to summarize what the teacher should know and to give ideas from which a course could be constructed. A particularly good example is Schach's 'Data collection and processing'. The chapter on cancer epidemiology concludes with a recommendation that teaching should be a mixture of formal lectures, informal seminars and 'learn-by-your-own-mistakes'. This last approach can be the most effective but it requires more time and an experienced and confident teacher. Unfortunately there are few examples for such exercises in this book, but there are some suggestions in the very approachable chapter by Reid on 'Epidemiology of infectious diseases and the study of outbreaks'.

As with most epidemiology textbooks there is a preponderance of chronic disease examples; more discussion of communicable diseases would have enriched the general chapters on design and analysis. Indeed the most inspiring chapter, Florey's 'Teaching the reluctant student' demonstrates the fascination and success stories of epidemiology by using historical examples of infectious disease.

This book will aid grass-root teachers in most of the branches of epidemiology, from chronic