
BOOK REVIEW

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Health Systems and the Challenge of Communicable Diseases: Experiences from Europe and Latin America

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It is well known that evolutionary patterns of communicable diseases are a part of our lives. Some are a result of how today's society is organised – or disorganised – and some are re-emerging. In turn, health systems are challenged to tackle and adapt themselves to these new and old diseases.

The study of health, particularly communicable diseases, in our own, *and* neighbouring countries, is increasingly important. Population growth and demographic change, climate change, economic development, globalization, war and poverty all have consequences on disease patterns. Travelling or “population movements,” as noted in the first chapter, have become a necessity in many ways as well as an unavoidable phenomenon. Many of us have become “modern nomads,” though not always by choice.

Health Systems and the Challenge of Communicable diseases in European and Latin American countries, recently published by the Open University Press on behalf of the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, studies the discourse on health and security and its influence on national and international politics. Fifteen chapters and over 30 tables and figures written by experts and researchers from Europe and Latin America, Canada, the USA, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), the World Health Organization and the World Bank, describe the current situation in terms of communicable diseases and the performance of healthcare systems. It is one of the first such major recountings of experiences through the health systems lens.

Following the introductory chapter, two chapters look into the transitional societies in their contextual environment from socio-demographic changes to the responsibility of governments in controlling communicable diseases. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 provide detailed information on the changing patterns of communicable diseases in a historical perspective, and describe the

epidemiological situations in Latin America and eastern Europe, and in particular the 15 countries of the former Soviet Union. Chapter 7, the central chapter, depicts the mechanisms of a system's approach to communicable diseases. The authors, Atun and Menabde, approach communicable diseases from the health systems perspective, emphasizing the importance of all the elements of a system's functioning as an integrated whole in order to provide the best possible care. They provide a framework for analyzing health systems and the context in which communicable diseases occur. They further emphasize that technical solutions for reforming health systems must be analyzed and dealt with together with the containment and cure of diseases. In order to provide effective responses to communicable diseases, it is of paramount importance to bring together or at least ensure the balanced interaction of all the functions of a healthcare system – employing a multidisciplinary approach to responding to communicable diseases.

Chapter 8 provides examples of the roles of international agencies and their tools to respond to threats of communicable diseases. Chapter 9 supports the notion of health systems and systems thinking in a communicable disease context. Schwalbe, Lazarus and Adeyi present how HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis control in post-Soviet Union countries should ideally be tackled by the interdependent principal components of health systems in an integral fashion: service delivery, financing, management and surveillance. They conclude that “any attempts to control these epidemics must be placed into the overall context of the health system, political support for integrating care, the adoption of international standards of care and their adaptation to local contexts, with an emphasis on the achievement of sustained improvements in outcomes”.

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The authors of chapters 10 through 13, from different perspective, call for the need to implement medical care based on evidence and the bringing together of the fundamental functions of a health system: governance, leadership, surveillance, monitoring and evaluation, and to extrapolate the significance of decent health services delivery. The question of how the patient with a communicable or chronic disease really “travels” through the system remains open. Given the fact that the care of, for example, a person living with HIV, or a person suffering from TB, has to a certain extent become predictable, have health care systems thought of introducing and implementing clear patient journeys or care pathways for the patient? Is it transparent how the patient travels through the system and what the patient is entitled to on his or her journey travelling back and forth, say, between the primary, secondary and even tertiary level of a health care system? Is care well coordinated, managed and integrated? Are the health care systems truly patient-oriented?

Chapter 14 details the ultimate importance financing and proper resource allocation play. The last chapter lays its hand on a more reflective and philosophical question about the visibility and invisibility of the “known”.

To date, many of the programmes to address communicable diseases have been donor-driven initiatives and the authors of this book stress the absolute need to move away from purely vertical, disease-driven programmes and to find ways to embed these – in a broader sense – in the social and health care system. Efforts in moving towards integrated and rather horizontal systems are presented through the various contributions throughout the book where the reader will sense the struggle for finding the best ways for health systems to support the challenges of communicable diseases in an equitable, effective and efficient manner. It goes

without saying that weak health systems are contributing to the spread of diseases – many of which are multidrug resistant.

Terms like reform, systems change, challenges and efficient health care systems are very common. Medicine occurs in a social and cultural setting and what concerns us all is a safe and efficient health care system. Over the years, various models have been employed to describe health care systems so as to simplify complex “aggregates”. *Health Systems and the Challenge of Communicable Diseases* provides illustrative and balanced information on communicable diseases and the way they play a role within health care systems. It is useful for anyone working in the field or seeking to gain a better understanding of how the health care systems of two regions, Europe and Latin America, respond to communicable diseases.

In conclusion, as Zsuzsana Jakab of the ECDC puts it in her foreword, “old diseases can re-emerge in rich countries just as easily as in countries in transition.” She continues by stating that no country is immune to the arrival of new diseases. There are many commonalities displayed between Europe and Latin America, and there are many issues such as economic, legal and regulatory, organizational and cultural areas that health systems must address in order to move away from a “silo” or vertical approach to programmes and instead have these programmes interacting horizontally throughout the main components of health systems so as to ensure and provide a sustainable approach to combating communicable diseases. This book vividly provides illustrative lessons from both regions on the responses to communicable diseases.

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