Silent victories. The history and practice of public health in twentieth-century America

Review by Walter Holland


This is a very interesting historical account of a large variety of public health activities in the United States. Ward is a former editor of the well-known “Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Series” published by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) while Warren is a historian from the New York Academy of Medicine. The background of the editors has obviously been crucial both in the choice of topics as well as of chapter authors. The accounts of advances in infectious disease are fascinating and outstanding. Each chapter tackles the problems from a historical angle and most are revealing.

The book is divided into ten parts – control of infectious disease, control of disease through vaccination, maternal and infant health, nutrition, occupational health, family planning, oral health and dental fluoridation, vehicular safety, cardiovascular disease, tobacco and disease prevention. Each part has two or three chapters which describe the advances and improvements that have occurred in their particular area with the second (or third) chapter giving a fascinating historical account of the background, development of methods and campaigns before concluding with a brief note on future needs. Each chapter has a voluminous bibliography, including advice on further reading materials.

It may be invidious to select individual chapters for their excellence, but several are outstanding in the analysis of advances which have been made. Of particular note are the chapters on the contribution of René Dubos to the control of infection, while the two chapters on poliomyelitis give a vivid account of the dread of this disease and the response by the government and public to its prevention, as well as the lessons that can be learnt from this for “biological warfare”. The account of the background to the First Surgeon General’s report on tobacco is illuminating and accurate in its conclusions of the effect that this has had on epidemiological thinking and practice.

Reviewing a book of such excellence is challenging – it is difficult to distinguish between different contributions. However it is important to consider whether any important areas have been omitted in order to put public health problems into perspective.

The provenance of the book from the CDC may have affected both the choice of problem/condition, as well as their descriptions. Although many of the chapters, particularly those on infant mortality and maternal health and nutrition, refer to the association with deprivation, none really deals in any depth with the recurring problems of poverty or the influence of ethnicity on health in the US.

It is tempting to identify gaps in any work – and there are some in this book. In the infectious disease field the omission of the work of Rammelkamp and his group on the control of streptococcal disease and rheumatic fever is surprising. The lack of analysis of influenza can, perhaps, be excused by the title “victories” since there has not been a victory, only a debacle with the mass immunisation against swine flu in the 1970s. There is also a relatively sparse account of environmental improvements in areas such as air pollution, or the abandonment of lead based paint and its effect on child health. A surprising omission is the work on tuberculosis in both Alaska (where it was a major scourge) and in the southern US. The conquest of syphilis is also not described, perhaps in deference to the scandal of Tuskegee County where a population was kept in ignorance and not treated for many years when effective control measures were available.

An area of public health in which the US has excelled is in its programmes of education and its Schools of Public Health. It is a shame that the means by which the “victories” have been achieved receive so little recognition. It is also to be hoped that the fear expressed on page 228 that the US will, in the future, “reject science-based policies”, as is happening with the current Bush administration, will not come to pass.

The title “Silent Victories” has a subtitle – “the history and practice of public health in twentieth century America”. This work undoubtedly portrays well some of the major successes. The preface disclaims any suggestion of comprehensiveness, nonetheless the choice of subjects and the omission of such major scourges, as tuberculosis and rheumatic fever, where US public health has played an enormous role is unfortunate. Although both the swine flu vaccination debacle and the Tuskegee episode are referred to in passing in the introduction, the book would have been immensely strengthened if it had included analysis of these unfortunate events. Rather than being only a celebration it would have been an important source of reference for public health in the United States. But perhaps the most striking analytic omission is the difference in infant mortality rates between whites and other ethnic groups which has persisted throughout this century. This illustrates the problems of poverty in the US more vividly than any other public health problem. The willingness to tolerate Third World conditions in parts of the country is an unfortunate blot on the US. The neglect of this issue in the book may be due to its provenance from a US government agency.

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