

fend an aging humanist-academic culture. Ignoring and ignorant are not far apart. The arguments advanced in *The Nuclear Muse* catch a worthy piece of the intellectual fabric, without grasping it whole cloth.

BOOKS: PUBLIC HEALTH

Things Fall Apart

Robert E. Shope

Is the public's health important? Is public health the responsibility of government? Is health of major portions of the world's population neglected today? Journalist Laurie Garrett gives a resounding "yes" to each question.

Garrett takes the reader to India, the Congo, and the states of the former Soviet Union to see through her eyes the destruction in the infrastructure of the public health systems in the face of plague, HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and tuberculosis. She shows that poverty, war, the collapse of governments, and the resulting failure to maintain essential disease-prevention skills and programs are to blame for the remarkable decline in health in these parts of the world and elsewhere. Comparing New York City, Los Angeles County, and the state of Minnesota, she issues a wake-up call for the United States as well.

Garrett begins by delving into the definition of public health. Is it curative medicine supplied by efficient health management and health care for all? No, she concludes, it is preventive services such as clean water, sanitation, safe food, pristine environment, prophylactic drugs and immunizations, health education, and effective screening for communicable and preventable diseases. In the developing world and the United States, these services are rapidly deteriorating in the face of urbanization, newly recognized diseases such as AIDS, recurring old diseases such as tuberculosis, complacency, antigovernmentalism, and political opportunism. Garrett does not, however, offer a definitive solution to the problems she documents. Rather, she implies that her answer is that given in response to the same question asked about her previous book, *The Coming Plague* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 1994). "As a journalist I felt uncomfortable: it wasn't my role to solve society's dilemmas, only to describe them." She worried that "some of the answers appeared

so complex that I felt inadequate to the task of elucidation."

Throughout the book, Garrett reminds us that public health is fragile. Where there is a choice, societies choose curative medicine over prevention. Sadly, I agree and I believe the reader will be convinced by her arguments.

In India in the fall of 1994, Garrett encountered an outbreak suspected of being pneumonic plague. The prosperous industrial economy of the city of Surat was completely devastated, not by the few deaths from plague but by the hysteria resulting from the perception of an enormous outbreak. At fault, according to Garrett, were the public health authorities, unable to establish rapid and accurate laboratory diagnoses; the press, which reported erroneous morbidity and mortality; and national and international agencies, unable to allay fears in other cities and nations. The combined damage (considering immediate medical costs, refugee control, loss of tourism, and international embargoes of Indian goods) was estimated at \$2 billion. Garrett identifies some villains, including the director-general of the World Health Organization.

Garrett next takes us to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire). Here we are treated to a fascinating, detailed account of the circumstances surrounding the 1995 Ebola outbreak in Kikwit. Garrett gathered much of the information first hand through her interviews there. She portrays many heroes including University of Kinshasa virologist Tamfum Muyembe, David Heymann of the World Health Organization, and Ali Khan of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Garrett is at her best in this chapter and the reader will be captivated. In spite of the complex situation she portrays with such excitement, the message comes through that here, again, there is a villain. This time it is the central government under Mobutu Sese Seko, whose corruption and mismanagement left the public health sector stripped of resources. Hence the epidemic flourished, to some extent spreading via contacts at hospitals.

The author then turns to Russia, documenting what she calls "the most astounding collapse in public health ever witnessed in peacetime in the industrialized world." She recites a litany of governmental deterioration,

corruption, failure to pay salaries, alcoholism, exposure to radiation, environmental pollution, and breakdown of vaccination and control of antibiotics. Garrett devotes sections to multidrug-resistant tuberculosis and to AIDS and hepatitis associated with the use of intravenous drugs. The vital statistics reflect the breakdown in public health; according to Garrett "between 1990 and 1994 Russian men lost...six years of their life expectancy and women lost three years."

One could argue that these chapters discuss sites where there are extreme problems with public health, but I do not think the cases are unique. For instance, many nations in South America, Africa, and Asia have just as serious problems with HIV/AIDS.

Garrett devotes a third of the book to a lengthy discussion of public health deterioration in the United States in the context of diminishing federal funding for health. This is a detailed, annotated, well-researched indictment of what the author terms "antigovernmentalism." In addition, she maintains, the nation has succumbed to the concept that in health matters the rights of the individual trump the rights of the community. In

Minnesota, a state previously known for its high standard of public health, antigovernmentalism was exemplified by public support for Jesse Ventura, Garrett's local villain. Her hero there is Michael Osterholm, whom she depicts as a person driven from public service by systematic rationing of resources. In Los Angeles County, as a result of California's Proposition 13, the public health infrastructure has suffered a similar marked deterioration. The book details for the United States many of the same problems that are found in developing countries, including AIDS, multidrug-resistant tuberculosis, and bacterial resistance to antibiotics.

I also found the chapter on biowarfare to be an accurate account of the current risks. It presents the useful perspective that any countermeasure will depend on and require a strong public health infrastructure for surveillance and response.

Garrett is an outstanding investigative reporter. *Betrayal of Trust* is a reflection of her meticulous research and her ability to write an engaging, scientifically credible text that can be understood by scientist and nonscientist alike. Antigovernmentalists will not be pleased, but Garrett has traveled the world to gather her material and has a message that we should all take seriously.



Bearing the burden. Counties such as Los Angeles have had to provide more basic health services for more people, with less money.

**Betrayal of Trust
The Collapse of
Global Public Health
by Laurie Garrett**

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