

Book Review

The Public Health Primer

Jo Fairbanks and William H. Wiese
Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998. 167 pp.
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Reviewed by Anita J. Gagnon

There are several books, both introductory and for the advanced reader, available on the subject of public health. There is also a vast array of books available on closely related topics such as epidemiology, public health policy, and community/public health nursing, not to mention a great selection of journal articles and on-line materials that are likely to be more current than any book. So why another book? What does this new volume have to offer?

Part I of *The Public Health Primer* comprises a chapter each on history and development, the current U.S. public health system, and the three major components of public health practice: assessment, policy development, and assurance. Part II describes the basic concepts and analytical tools of public health, offering a chapter each on epidemiology and determinants of disease, basic measurements and statistics, making inferences from observations, and the surveillance and monitoring of the health of populations. Part III describes public health interventions and applications, with chapters devoted to health promotion and health protection, personal health-care services, health program planning, and global health. The book features references, a glossary, a list of acronyms, and an index.

The wide range of topics covered could lead the reader to think, after perusing the table of contents, that the concepts will be addressed simplistically and that the large number of topics will not be linked in a coherent fashion. Given that *The Public Health Primer* is intended as an introduction to public health, the variety of topics is to be expected, but the authors also cover issues that one might not expect to find in an introductory text: the political context, social determinants of health, conceptual models for health promotion, and ethical considerations. Fairbanks and Wiese ensure coherency by including an introduction to each of the three parts and to most of the chapters. They also offer more in-depth study through reference lists.

Their description of the current American public health system is a particularly clear review of what many people feel is a confusing plethora of systems and services. The discussion of risks and statistics is simply and clearly written. The examples cited throughout the book, although almost exclusively pertaining to the United States, are excellent in that they represent the variety of issues that public health comprises.

The heavy emphasis on the role of epidemiologists in public health might lead one to think epidemiology students are Fairbanks and Wiese's target audience. The authors state that epidemiology is the science that most permits understanding and rational decision-making in public health. Some readers might contest this view, seeing other sciences as equally relevant in the public health domain. Many readers might disagree with the authors' notion that a person identified as having a disease should be referred to as a "case." Further, Fairbanks and Wiese's description of study designs is limited: they present the advantages and disadvantages of only certain designs.

Taken as a whole, however, *The Public Health Primer* is a concise, well-written overview that can stand alone as an introductory text or serve as a point of departure in exploring several avenues in public health. Americans and others who are particularly interested in the U.S. health-care system will want to read the book in its entirety, while other readers will still find at least eight of the 11 chapters useful. Recommended.

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