

Book reviews

Spatial and Syndromic Surveillance for Public Health

Edited by Andrew B. Lawson and Ken Kleinman Publisher: John Wiley and Sons

Reviewed by Narendra Singh, Communicable Disease Surveillance Specialist, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Noumea, New Caledonia.

This text provides an interesting overview of the current methods in spatial surveillance that may benefit public health professionals in the early detection of events or disease outbreaks. It highlights applications of various statistical methods to observe or detect changes in data and patterns, and to build models to assist future predictions. These applications are relevant for both single and multiple disease data.

The text is appropriate for the current global situation. Of note is the fact that it is a direct result of the surge in the bioterrorism threat, which has been a concern for the global community in recent times. It demonstrates the use of sophisticated, advanced methods and surveillance systems that can provide alerts of possible outbreaks of disease or contamination.

Spatial and Syndromic Surveillance for Public Health provides a survey of the state of the art in public syndromic surveillance. It examines disease maps in conjunction with various data using advanced statistical methods, and even develops models.

This text provides food for thought about ways of monitoring data to detect bioterrorism events.

SARS: How a Global Epidemic Was Stopped

World Health Organization, Western Pacific Region

Reviewed by Narendra Singh, Communicable Disease Surveillance Specialist, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Noumea, New Caledonia.

This book is an excellent account of the events surrounding the severe acute respiratory syndrome

(SARS) epidemic that threatened to engulf the whole world. SARS took the world by surprise. It was unique and showed explosive power, setting off multiple outbreaks. The book describes the happenings around that time, especially the gallant efforts on the part of WHO. It describes the anxieties, fears, difficulties and challenges as the disease spread, as well as some of the unsung heroes of the epidemic. In addition, it lists the many health experts who helped combat the disease. Perhaps most importantly, the book reflects on the lessons learnt from the SARS epidemic, which will no doubt shape the future of global public health and the response to public health emergencies of international concern.

In his overview, the WHO Regional Director Western Pacific Region, Dr Shigeru Omi, states: 'I believe that one of the lessons that SARS taught us is that public health around the world has entered an era where it will need to be on constant guard against threats from emerging diseases. It is my hope that this book will help guide generations to come as they take on those challenges.'

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He states that SARS 'caused more fear and social disruption than any other outbreak of our time'. Whilst it killed only small numbers of people, it nevertheless 'buckled economies, crippled international trade and travel and emptied the streets of some of the world's most prosperous cities.'

The book is an inside account of the experiences of WHO professionals, and a vivid account of events as they unfolded in those fateful months of 2003. As well, it analyses some of the questions, including: where did the frightening disease come from? How did it spread? And will the world be better prepared if it returns?

The public health experts and scientists who were in the centre of the battle against SARS give a clear account of how the disease spread, how it came close to bringing public health systems to their knees and how, in the end, an unprecedented global coalition stopped the epidemic in its tracks.

The book describes the furious nature of the spread of infectious disease in this globalised world and the value of modern communication tools in public health. It also reaffirms the effectiveness of 19th-century measures in combating the epidemic ahead of modern technology.

This text is an indispensable guide to the science of SARS for medical and public health scientists and practitioners. It emphasises the importance of good surveillance and of transparency in handling public

health crises, and that the success in combating SARS was due to a global collaborative effort by countries, agencies and experts. It is a tribute to specific heroes, and to those doctors, nurses and health care workers who gave their lives in the fight against SARS.

Public Health Surveillance in the Pacific

Publisher: Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), Noumea, New Caledonia, 1998 - ISBN 982-203-607-8

Reviewed by Christelle Lepers, Surveillance Information Officer, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Noumea, New Caledonia.

This monograph relates the background against which the Pacific Public Health Surveillance Network (PPHSN) was established in 1996. It is the fruit of several authors' work: David Morens, Michael O'Leary, Heather Booth, Yvan Souares, Mahomed Patel, Clement Malau, Amato Elymore, Dave Saunders, Michel Germain, Scott Norton and Gerald Haberkorn. All of them – whether epidemiologist, statistician or demographer – have written sharp and constructive reports on public health surveillance activities in the Pacific Islands and listed interesting proposals for a common regional framework.

The number of public health surveillance aspects, perspectives and challenges covered by the articles in this publication (from Hippocrates' theories to the modern

tools of epidemiology – not forgetting the realities and challenges of Pacific Island countries and territories, narrated by Pacific Island health professionals), as well as the several origins of the authors (health professionals from Pacific Island countries and territories, regional agencies/organisations and universities), show how deeply the subject was examined before PPHSN was created. This is certainly one of the reasons why the network is still active 10 years later, and makes the book well worth reading (or re-reading).

Anyone who has an interest in public health surveillance in the Pacific and/or in understanding the origins of PPHSN should read this book. Readers will also learn about the PacSel method, a practical tool for helping to establish priorities in public health surveillance and ultimately release pressure on data providers: 'A system based on a series of scored criteria was developed, to evaluate the relevance of a disease, condition or

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syndrome to be subject to public health surveillance ... The method proposed for the determination of health indicators is based on the same scored framework used to select diseases subject to surveillance. The criteria are chosen ... bearing in mind basic principles such as acceptability and affordable at national and regional levels.' The PacSel method is explained by Yvan Souares.

In December 2006, PPHSN will celebrate its 10th anniversary. The time has come for PPHSN members to publish a second monograph acknowledging their accomplishments and listing new ideas for future directions of the network. We look forward to it!

**They are a crowd of lawyers and writers, each more ignorant than the next, who will fight for a share of power.
(Pierre-Joseph Proudhon – 1868)**