

material is squeezed into five, rather short chapters. Additionally, the text is not supported by any exercises to help understand the difficult topics, especially those related to the area of statistical inference. So the purpose of the detailed introduction to statistics is questionable, in particular where there is almost no reference to the statistics in the further reading.

The second section, 'System-based epidemiology', contains a systematic review of the epidemiological facts related to the most important diseases plaguing contemporary Western societies. The information covers incidence, mortality, some aetiology and the main risk factors for the selected diseases. The diseases are catalogued using a system-based approach starting from circulatory diseases through respiratory, digestive, renal, neurological and musculoskeletal diseases. There is a significant emphasis on cancers, the epidemiology and risk factors of which are discussed both in a separate chapter and in the chapters considering specific systems. In contrast, as the handbook is oriented mainly at the diseases occurring in Western societies, significantly less attention is given to infectious diseases, which plague to a larger extent populations of developing countries. Of the infectious diseases, only influenza and AIDS are discussed extensively. The adopted sectional approach gives simplicity and clarity to the extensive material and allows for easier and more methodical study. Although this section presents a considerable amount of information on the epidemiology of selected diseases, it does not offer any interesting hypotheses about why the changes in patterns of the incidence and mortality of particular diseases can be observed, and how the major risk factors are related to these changes. Without these hypotheses, epidemiology as a branch of knowledge appears to be a scanty science founded on simple statistical inference.

The last part of the handbook is probably the most important from the perspective of future doctors' issues of 'Clinical and public health applications'. This section gives practical cues on how to read and evaluate epidemiological papers and how to work with evidence-based practice. The chapters are enriched with text boxes and tables, which briefly explain the most important definitions and issues. Particularly useful are the case scenarios showing step-by-step how to analyse abstracts of epidemiological papers. The section also contains interesting chapters related to public health practice and the economics of health care.

In summary, *Epidemiology and Prevention: A System-Based Approach* is a modern, clear (although in some parts a bit boring) textbook containing the most important information in the area of contemporary epidemiology. Together with accompanying materials submitted on the web page, it creates a solid tool for teaching and learning epidemiology. Certainly, it can be recommended not only for medical and dental undergraduates, but also for any students dealing with the topic of public health.

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A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World. By Gregory Clark. Pp. 440. (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007.) £17.95, ISBN 978-0-691-12135-2, hardback. doi: 10.1017/S0021932008002903.

What kind of economy prevailed during the pre-industrial age, and what triggered the Industrial Revolution in 18th/19th century England? In this book, UC Davis economic historian Gregory Clark describes a pre-industrial Malthusian world in which plagues and wars created wealth by killing off excess population. Clark attributes economic development to changes in the human capital. He shows that homicide rates and interest rates declined steadily since the 13th century while literacy increased. People became less impulsive, more future-oriented and more rational. Institutional changes and rising prosperity followed rather than preceded these behavioural changes. Clark offers a most interesting explanation for these trends. Analysing early 17th century wills, he finds that thanks to higher marital fertility, rich testators had nearly twice as many children as the poor. As early as the 13th century, rich landowners already had more descendants than the poor. As the surplus children of the wealthy cascaded down the social hierarchy, they disseminated the ‘capitalist’ virtues of ambition, perseverance, self-control and long-term planning throughout the society through cultural and genetic transmission. Is this credible? Today, shared environment accounts for 8% of the variation in adult earnings, and additive genes for 42% (Rowe *et al.*, 1999). This fits with Clark’s observation that money-earning ability was transmitted in families, although the relative importance of family environment and additive genes in the pre-industrial age is uncertain. Clark’s description of the Malthusian economy and the Darwinian mechanisms that propelled England toward the Industrial Revolution is brilliant, but he cannot explain the runaway economic and technological growth since the early 19th century. This is nevertheless a remarkable book, with an unerring focus on the fundamentals of the Malthusian economy and the large-scale economic trends. It is a unique source of factual information, beautifully presented in almost 200 tables and figures, and will make an excellent textbook for college-level courses of history and economics.

References

- Rowe, D. C., Vesterdal, W. J. & Rodgers, J. L. (1999) Herrnstein’s syllogism: Genetic and shared environmental influences on IQ, education, and income. *Intelligence* 26, 405–423.

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