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Pocket-sized epidemiology

The Oxford Specialist Handbooks seek to provide concise references for trainees and practitioners in a host of specialties; this recent volume, *Infectious Disease Epidemiology*, was designed as a quick reference guide to comprehensively review the topic for students and practicing infectious disease specialists. The handbook has two sections: section 1 covers the basic epidemiological methods common to all investigations, with special emphasis on recent methodological approaches relevant to infectious disease investigations; section 2 reviews the epidemiological features of the most commonly confronted infections internationally. The volume presents recent data and examples (eg, severe acute respiratory syndrome and Ebola), but cannot be so timely as to contain information on the current Zika virus outbreak in context of Latin America and the Caribbean. The authors are mostly from the UK, with limited representation from the US and South Africa. Thus, the volume has a bent towards Public Health England and the European approach to public health and epidemiology.

Across 17 chapters over 250 pages, section 1 summarises some of the standard methods in epidemiology (eg, surveillance, outbreak investigations, study design, clinical trials, clinical epidemiology), with more focal chapters directly applicable to the study of infections (eg, emerging infectious diseases, hospital infections, microbiology). Perhaps of greatest importance are the chapters on new and developing methods that might be novel to practitioners or those new to the study of infectious disease epidemiology. Among these methods are molecular epidemiology, immunoepidemiology, spatial epidemiology and contact studies, and transmission-dynamic models. Each of these chapters should be viewed as very introductory, providing the basic vocabulary, methods and approaches used in contemporary studies. Any reader versed in these methods will find their presentation quite elementary. For example, the chapter on economic analysis is unlikely to be sufficient for a practicing epidemiologist to actually conduct a substantive analysis of costs in an intervention study. The chapter on transmission-dynamic modelling will, however, provide the neophyte with a solid introduction to the components and thinking that make up this approach.

Section 2 provides reviews on the epidemiology of selected diseases that cause the greatest morbidity and mortality from infectious causes in high-income and middle-income countries. This section of the handbook is considerably shorter (about 100 pages focusing on ten groups of infectious causes), and the presentations are somewhat constrained. The chapters on respiratory and faecal-oral epidemiology are comprehensive, whereas those on health-care associated infections, sexually transmitted infections, and HIV/AIDS are quite cursory. The imbalance in presentation might reflect the complexity in the latter infections, which make them less amenable to simple, standardised approaches.

Perhaps of greatest use to the harried infectious disease specialist are the illustrations in this handbook. The authors have made judicious use of illustrations of many classic time-related components of infection: attack rates, infectivity, and the natural history of HIV-1 are routinely reported examples. The illustrations accompanying the text on vaccine evaluation are particularly helpful for relating the important issues involved in determination of the efficacy and effectiveness of vaccines in infectious disease prevention.

The creation of a book that will fit into the pocket of a laboratory coat requires limits to its physical size that might offset comprehensiveness with summarisation. Many of the chapters just touch on some of the most debated (and difficult to explain) issues in contemporary epidemiology—notably, confounding and effect modification, as well as causal inference, which are virtually absent here. An additional limitation is the very brief bibliography that accompanies each chapter. The limitations of a handbook could be overcome by slightly more comprehensive citations to some of the seminal and more recent literature underlying each of these expositions. Of course, a minuscule font size is already required to pack as much into a handbook as is feasible.

Overall, the Oxford Specialist Handbook on *Infectious Disease Epidemiology* fulfils the goals of its editors—it is a comprehensive treatise on the methods and major infections confronted by infectious disease epidemiologists internationally. This guide should serve to as a reminder for practitioners of the epidemiology that they might have briefly studied or reviewed in the past, and provides an excellent review for those new to the field.

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