

# Books & Electronic Media

## Health, civilization and the state: a history of public health from ancient to modern times

by Dorothy Porter. Published by Routledge, London and New York, ISBN 0-415-20036-9, 1999, 376 pages, price £50 hardback, £16.99 paperback.

This academic and well-referenced book is a masterly overview of the historical context and development of public health. It focuses mainly on the provision and organization of health services from ancient times to the 21st century, placing public health within its political, social and economic context. Few books have been written with such breadth. The author is a well-known academic in the history of medicine, who received Wellcome Foundation support to complete this work. There is an excellent index.

The book, which focuses mainly on Europe and North America, is divided into four parts. The first summarizes the period from ancient times to the 18th century, showing how protecting the health of powerful elites has always been closely linked to the existing state and power structures. For instance, *On airs, waters and places*, by Hippocrates, was largely for itinerant Greek physicians, to help them advise the wealthy on how to choose a healthy place to live in and where to found new city states.

The more substantial second and third parts are the most interesting. Part Two examines the first instances of better health being upheld as a human right following the French Revolution, and describes how the emerging social sciences were applied to explaining and controlling patterns of disease. The newly formed and more centralized national European states in the 19th century became the enforcers of public health laws and regulations, and the rise of a national public health service in Victorian Britain extended this state control to local government. Interestingly, the USA favoured a less bureaucratic model, in which social reforms were guided by Puritan moral codes linking social cleanliness to godliness. Part Three describes how the collection of population statistics was centralized as recognition grew of the state's responsibility for the health of its citizens. This was followed by the rise of the classical European welfare state from

the early part of the 20th century. Modern European public health developed from its association with governments, while preventive medicine began in the USA, reflecting different perceptions of the respective roles of the individual and the state in maintaining health, and different political models of welfare.

Part Four, a weaker section, shows how more recently individuals have been given greater responsibility for protecting their own health and how this is linked to modern concepts of health promotion. The epilogue is disappointing, as the future policy implications arising from this strong historical analysis are not made explicit. Another disappointment is the absence of diagrams or figures, which would have enlivened a dense text. However, I strongly recommend this book to anyone who wants to understand the provision of public health within the perspective of history and political economy. ■

### Patrick Vaughan

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine  
Keppel Street  
London WC1E 7HT  
England

## Preparing for natural birth

CD-ROM by Lennart Righard with music by Jan Eric Strom. Available from Health Education Associates, 8 Jan Sebastian Way Suite no.13, Sandwich, MA 02563-2359, USA, price US\$ 22.

The aim of this audio CD is to help women achieve complete relaxation during pregnancy and labour. It starts with the author encouraging the listener to maintain good posture, and then to become slowly more aware of her own body, her breathing, and, finally, her unborn child. It refers continuously to the body's ability to give birth. The part designed to help during labour uses the image of waves breaking on the shore. It invites the woman to imagine herself meeting and following each contraction as though stepping into a wave, then lying peacefully on the beach. "You're getting more and more relaxed", Righard says soothingly, and "You are fully confident

that your body can give birth." He assures the listener that this feeling of confidence will remain with her throughout the time of labour, even when the contractions are strong and frequent.

These relaxation exercises are followed by practical information and advice on choosing a midwife, where to give birth, and which interventions to seek or avoid. Righard advocates ambulation and using a vertical position during the first and second stages of labour, as these promote more effective contractions.

Like all the medical information on this CD, this is sound advice, and well supported by research. Other kinds of recommendation need to be used selectively however, according to the cultural setting. For example, the assurance, "You can ask for sweet drinks or fruits whenever you want" would lead to disappointment in most United States maternity homes, where women in labour are routinely denied food and drink as soon as they arrive at the hospital. Similarly, the listener is encouraged to have a warm shower or bath at any time, but in many places this is either not possible or not the accepted practice. "You can have anything you want, you are in charge", says Righard, which is a soothing thought but in most circumstances a bit utopian if applied to any practical extent. With this mild caveat, however, obstetricians, nurses, childbirth educators, labour coaches and others should encourage women to use this compact disc as a very effective aid to achieving relaxation and self-confidence. It ends with excellent advice on letting the newborn find the breast and begin to suck. ■

### Marie Biancuzzo

Perinatal Clinical Nurse Specialist  
PO Box 387, Herndon VA 20172  
USA  
(email: marie@wmc-worldwide.com)