

LONDON  
SCHOOL of  
HYGIENE  
& TROPICAL  
MEDICINE



LSHTM Research Online

Gorsky, M; (2003) Images of disease: science, public policy and health in post- war Europe. *Medical history*, 47 (4). pp. 531-532. ISSN 0025-7273 <https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/id/eprint/15227>

Downloaded from: <http://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/15227/>

DOI:

**Usage Guidelines:**

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact [researchonline@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:researchonline@lshtm.ac.uk).

Available under license: Copyright the publishers

<https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk>

## Book Reviews

**Ilana Löwy and John Krige** (eds), *Images of disease: science, public policy and health in post-war Europe*, Luxembourg, European Commission, 2001, pp. 377, €18.50 (paperback 92-894-1146-5).

Despite its spatial and temporal constraints, this is a book with a wide brief. It collects papers given at a 1998 conference in a series sponsored by the European Commission dealing with science and society, the aim of these being to compare and contrast European experiences and to reflect on international collaboration. The conference title, "images of disease", echoes Charles Rosenberg's formulation of the process by which the understanding of disease is "framed" within its historical context, and the concern of the contributors is the interplay between medical science, public health professionals and the state in this process. Beyond this there is considerable variation in approach: some essays take cultural representations of health as their starting point, situating these within the changing interests of political regimes; others begin with scientific advances and go on to draw out the factors which condition the experts' influence upon public policy; others deal not with particular diseases but with health systems themselves, relating matters such as the extent of institutional care to ideological and organizational climate. There are thematic variations too. Some contributors discuss epidemiological interventions (with four chapters focused on tuberculosis), some examine campaigns against smoking and alcoholism and some treat public health in the broadest sense through a study of state agencies (with two chapters on maternity and child welfare).

It is probably a reflection of the state of scholarship that there is little genuinely comparative or pan-European material here, with most authors concerning themselves with individual states. Two exceptions are Barbara Gutmann Rosenkrantz's discussion of internationalism in the campaign against tuberculosis and Jean-Paul Gaudillière's study of the contrasting interventions pursued by Britain and France to address Down's syndrome.

Gaudillière's chapter, in particular, illustrates the potential of comparative work to illuminate national differences in the reception and application of new diagnostic techniques. Otherwise the authors deal mainly with Britain, Germany, the Soviet Union, Spain and Poland, with the latter two claiming significant attention. This apparently idiosyncratic choice of national settings throws up some fascinating insights. On the one hand we see how health policies were overtly driven by ideological concerns in authoritarian regimes; for example the Francoist anti-tuberculosis campaign was initially depicted as part of a broader struggle against the "sick Spain" (p. 143) of the Republic, while in post-war Poland the prevalence of the disease was blamed on the iniquities of capitalism. In the West meanwhile, as Ilana Löwy notes in the introduction, the politicization of health policy was often veiled by the technical language in which debates were couched. Löwy's own chapter powerfully develops the point, arguing that visual and rhetorical representations of cancer treatment as a heroic struggle to destroy "killer cells", have sustained the dominance of cytokine therapy since the 1970s, perhaps to the detriment of other approaches. The theme of imagery is less well-developed elsewhere. A particularly frustrating section is Lyubov Gurjeva's short, but intriguing, analysis of Soviet propaganda images of child health; this is incongruously embedded in a chapter about archival resources in Russia, and has no accompanying illustrations from the poster collection it discusses. A more effective section is the coupling of two Polish chapters, one on anti-alcohol propaganda and the other on literary images of alcoholism. These contrast the policy failure of governmental appeals to collective responsibility with the multiplicity of ways in which novelists deployed drunkenness to represent the contradictions and hypocrisies of Polish society. Shortly after comes an all too brief concluding chapter by Klim McPherson, despairing of the contemporary failure in the West to address nicotine addiction and the reduction of cholesterol. Juxtapositions such as these, which drive to the heart of the dilemma of reconciling individual freedoms with long-term

## Book Reviews

goals of population health, make this a stimulating collection.

**Martin Gorsky**,  
London School of Hygiene and  
Tropical Medicine

**Alexandra Minna Stern and Howard Markel** (eds), *Formative years: children's health in the United States 1880–2000*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2002, pp. xvi, 304, £42.50, US\$60.00 (hardback 0-472-11268-6).

In his 1998 overview of the writing of medical history, John Burnham argued that recent decades have witnessed tensions between medically trained and non-medically trained historians, or what he called MDs and PhDs (John Burnham, *How the idea of profession changed the writing of medical history*, London, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine). There are no such tensions in *Formative years* in which six of the ten authors hold an MD and a PhD. The foreword, written by Leon Eisenberg (MD but no PhD), provides an impassioned plea for the teaching of medical history to medical students and the importance of contextualizing medicine. This volume is probably reflective of the peculiar breed of medical practitioners attracted to child health; as Alexandra Stern and Howard Markel remark in the introduction, “Whether revered or reviled, those who have provided medical care to children have always been involved in social, political, and cultural questions beyond the domain of the sickbed, clinic, and hospital” (p. 1).

The introduction provides a useful overview of the historiography of child health in America, while the essays themselves are based on primary research, breaking new ground. Part 1 discusses the rise of paediatrics as a specialty. This includes a chapter by Russell Viner, based on his 1997 Cambridge PhD thesis on Abraham Jacobi, appointed to the New York Medical College in 1860 as the world's “first dedicated professor of pediatrics” (p. 23). Howard Markel discusses the relationship between public health workers

and paediatricians in New York City in the Progressive era. In a fascinating chapter on incubators and ventilators for premature infants, Jeffrey Baker shows how a study of technology can reveal much about the culture of the people using it. For instance, in late-nineteenth-century France the incubator was designed as an extension of the mother, whereas in the United States it was a substitute, “a symbol of science and of a more direct challenge of the physician to the mother's authority” (p. 71).

Part 2, ‘Standardizing the child’, includes chapters by Jeffrey Brosco on the use of weight charts in diagnosis, Alexandra Stern on Better Baby contests and their social implications in interwar Indiana, and Heather Prescott on the social construction of “normal” adolescent growth since 1900. Again the social context is highlighted and explored. Brosco's chapter shows how an “epidemic” of malnutrition was constructed in the 1920s owing to the widespread use of weight and height charts. Ironically, the epidemic ended just as the economic depression began and one would expect an increase in malnutrition. The end of the epidemic coincided with the victory of paediatricians over public health workers; the diagnosis of malnutrition now required a more complex clinical judgement by the physician. Brosco effectively shows how the rise and fall of the epidemic had little to do with actual changes in community health.

The final section of the book, “‘Discovering’ new diseases in children”, includes chapters by Richard Meckel on the construction of school diseases in late-nineteenth-century America, Chris Feudtner on the history of juvenile diabetes, Hugh Evans on the discovery of child sexual abuse in America, and Janet Golden on foetal alcohol syndrome in the late twentieth century. Evans describes how gonorrhoea in children, now understood to be the result of sexual abuse, was explained away as non-sexual in origin before the 1970s. Discussing a subject often hidden from view, he uses the diagnosis of gonorrhoea to show that child sexual abuse was much more prevalent than formerly believed. In the final chapter, Golden explores the acceptance of foetal alcohol syndrome as a diagnosis from 1973, linking it to the thalidomide