

Public Health: The Master Looks Again

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The inner workings of America's modern public health system are complex, developed over the last 150 years as a result of social movements, epidemics, advances in medical care, wars, industrialization and a host of other forces brought to bear on our population as our young country embraced the rapid march of progress throughout the 20th century. The 4th edition of *Public Health: What It Is and How It Works* (Bernard J. Turnock, Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2009, 534 pp.) is exactly that: a definition and description of public health, how it all works, and why it's important. First published in 1997, the book is the same general structure as previous editions but with some additions and revisions that both improve its utility as a basic text for students of public health and health administration, and reflect changes in the practice and practice environment of public health since the first edition. The unifying construct also remains the same: a systems approach to public health, grounded in a conceptual model that characterizes public health by its mission, functions, capacity, processes and outcomes. By his own claim, Turnock wanted to provide a framework that enables readers to examine America's approach to health: that is, the 'investment strategy' that "...directs more than 100 times the resources toward medical services than...for population-based prevention strategies..." despite that treatment strategies contributed only 5 of the 30 years of increased life

expectancy achieved in the United States since 1900 (Preface, p. xiv).

Bernard Turnock, with a medical degree from the University of Illinois at Chicago and an MPH degree from UC Berkeley, and professional experience in local and state health agencies as well as clinical and teaching experience in academia, may be the perfect person to write this book. His biases clearly rest with public health workers he worked alongside during his years with the Chicago and New York City Departments of Health, as well as the Illinois State Health Department, whom he unabashedly admires for their energy, commitment, creativity, intelligence and sometimes pure raw faith in the power of public health to right most wrongs. He returned to the University of Illinois at Chicago as a teacher and Acting Dean of the School of Public Health in 1990, where he continues as a Clinical Professor, Director of the Division of Community Health Sciences, and Director of the Illinois Public Health Preparedness Center. His teaching is based wholly on his vision that the public health workforce of this new century requires an increasingly broad array of skills and abilities – thus the ever-improving editions of this book that reflect his own learning over the past decade-and-a-half. The book is meant to serve as much as a primer for students as it is a handbook for practitioners already advanced in their years in the field. It succeeds grandly at both.

The first change the observant reader will notice in this edition is the Preface, where Turnock lists

thirty of the core competencies for the MPH degree recently established by the Association of Schools of Public Health. Subsequent chapters of the book focus especially on competencies in the categories of leadership, professionalism, systems thinking, health policy and management, and program planning. Other helpful additions include learning objectives at the beginning of each chapter, and ‘public health spotlights’ at the end of each of the first eight chapters that serve to illustrate how the chapter’s main points work in real world situations. For example, Chapter 4 on Law, Government and Public Health spotlights the history of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at the end of the chapter. My own favorite is Chapter 7 on Public Health Interventions that spotlights at the end the history of such remarkable achievements as seat belt use, decreasing alcohol-impaired driving, and home visitation to reduce violence against young children. Though these are all well-known stories now, it’s nonetheless still thrilling to re-read some of public health’s great successes during the last century, some of which were still unfolding when I first entered the field 20 years ago.

After Chapter 1 on What Is Public Health, perhaps the most useful chapters to those newer to public health are Chapters 5 and 6, Core Functions and Public Health Practice, and The Infrastructure of Public Health, respectively. Core functions refers to the basic business of public health practice –assessment, policy development and assurance—and infrastructure is identifying all that needs to be in place to support the core functions and essential services of public health.

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The section on the public health workforce in Chapter 6 is expanded from previous editions, since a number of the competencies it identifies relate to professionalization of public health students. Turnock clearly considers human resources a key infrastructure ingredient, along with the organizations that facilitate the contributions of a diverse workforce, professional leadership at the helm of these organizations, and the information systems required for identifying problems, determining appropriate interventions, and tracking progress on agreed-upon goals and objectives. The Chapter 6 spotlights are particularly interesting in that the history of public health achievements in the 20th century is presented, followed by the story of the development of the system that assures the safe food and water supply we now enjoy and rely on in America.

Ever the teacher generously sharing everything he has in his toolbox, Turnock includes helpful discussion questions and exercises, along with extensive references, at the end of every chapter. He makes most of his material available for on-line courses as well. Turnock has published extensively over the course of his career in a variety of professional journals, and has a master’s command of most of the critical public health issues facing the field today. Though this latest edition could have benefitted from a somewhat stronger editorial hand, it is nonetheless a valuable contribution to the profession for students, teachers and public health workers alike.