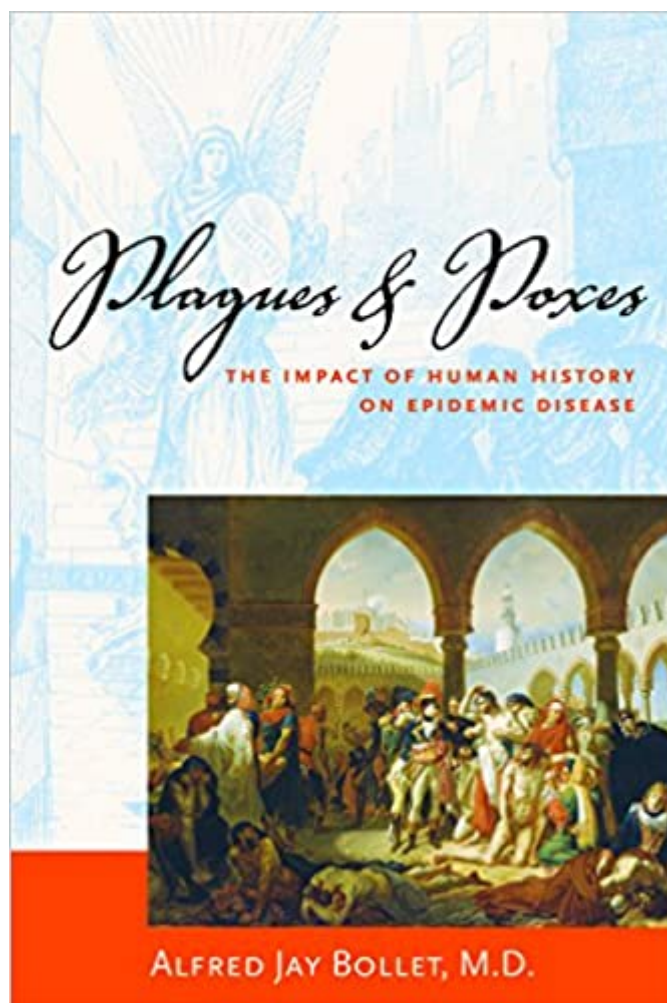


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Plagues & Poxes: The Impact Of Human History On Epidemic Disease



Synopsis

"Since publication of the initial version of *Plagues & Poxes* in 1987, which had the optimistic subtitle "The Rise and Fall of Epidemic Disease," the rise of new diseases such as AIDS and the deliberate modification and weaponization of diseases such as anthrax have changed the way we perceive infectious disease. With major modifications to deal with this new reality, the acclaimed author of *Civil War Medicine: Challenges and Triumphs* has updated and revised this series of essays about changing disease patterns in history and some of the key events and people involved in them. It deals with the history of major outbreaks of disease - both infectious diseases such as plague and smallpox and noninfectious diseases - and shows how they are in many cases caused inadvertently by human actions, including warfare, commercial travel, social adaptations, and dietary modifications. To these must now be added discussion of the intentional spreading of disease by acts of bioterrorism, and the history and knowledge of those diseases that are thought to be potential candidates for intentional spread by bioterrorists. Among the many topics discussed are: How the spread of smallpox and measles among previously unexposed populations in the Americas, the introduction of malaria and yellow fever from Africa via the importation of slaves into the Western hemisphere, and the importation of syphilis to Europe all are related to the modern interchange of diseases such as AIDS. How the ever-larger populations in the cities of Europe and North America gave rise to "crowd diseases" such as polio by permitting the existence of sufficient numbers of non-immune people in sufficient numbers to keep the diseases from dying out. How the domestication of animals allowed diseases of animals to affect humans, or perhaps become genetically modified to become epidemic human diseases. Why the concept of deficiency diseases was not understood before the early twentieth century disease, after all, was the presence of something abnormal, how could it be due to the absence of something? In fact, the first epidemic disease in human history probably was iron deficiency anemia. How changes in the availability and nature of specific foods have affected the size of population groups and their health throughout history. The introduction of potatoes to Ireland and corn to Europe, and the relationship between the modern technique of rice milling and beriberi, all illustrate the fragile nutritional state that results when any single vegetable crop is the main source of food. Why biological warfare is not a new phenomenon. There have been attempts to intentionally cause epidemic disease almost since the dawn of recorded history, including the contamination of wells and other water sources of armies and civilian populations of course, the spread of smallpox to Native Americans during the French and Indian War is known to every schoolchild. With our increased technology, it is not surprising that we now have to deal with problems such as weaponized spores of anthrax."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Alfred Jay Bollet is a distinguished academic rheumatologist who has chaired the department of medicine at two medical schools. The first edition of *Plagues and Poxes*, published in 1987, focused on the waxing and waning of specific diseases and their impact on world history. Half of that edition was organized around the status of medicine as illustrated by the treatment of U.S. presidents or their family members. This new edition devotes more space to noncontagious diseases and traces the effect of historical events, in particular the use of diseases as terrorist weapons and the modern potential for such uses. Eleven chapters are either major or minor revisions of those in the first edition, and six chapters are entirely new. The writing is for a general readership, with explanations of the rather few anatomical terms and other technical references. The content is presented in an interesting fashion, with numerous bits of obscure information scattered throughout, often with a relevance that is more historical than medical. For example, the chapter on yellow fever relates that during the famous charge up San Juan Hill in the Spanish-American War, Colonel Teddy Roosevelt was the only rider. The price of Scotch whiskey increased during the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic because of a belief that the drink had therapeutic value. Regarding poliomyelitis, we learn that during Franklin Roosevelt's numerous railway journeys, the speed of the train was limited to 35 miles per hour to minimize his discomfort from the vibration of the car. "Spring fever" originated as a term of American colonists for the scurvy-induced lassitude that set in after a winter without fresh fruits and vegetables. Unfortunately, I cannot determine the basis for some dubious statements

because specific references are not given. For instance, bubonic plague was not called the Black Death in the 14th century but, rather, "the great mortality." "Black Death" came into use in 16th-century Scandinavia and was used in England in the 17th century. And, the author claims, "venereal urethritis . . . was known at least two millennia before syphilis appeared," even though no ancient description of involuntary urethral discharge mentions pain, making the diagnosis of gonorrhoea doubtful before an English description in the 14th century. Also, the book states that "in 1831 . . . John Snow published a report suggesting that cholera was being spread by contaminated water," despite the fact that Snow would have made this report at the age of 18 years; it usually is dated to 1849. "The Ebers papyrus . . . recorded the effectiveness of extracts of the autumn crocus (the source of colchicine) for treating arthritis" is an unlikely statement that might have resulted from confusion between saffron (the dried stigma of *Crocus sativus*), which is believed to have appeared in the Ebers papyrus (although not in association with arthritis), and the bulb of another crocus, *Colchicum autumnale*, the source of colchicine. Names sometimes appear inconsistently, such as "Dr. Karl Landsteiner and his assistant, E. Popper" (Erwin), and the virologist Flexner's first name (Simon) should have been given to avoid confusion with his equally famous brother, Abraham. Of the rather few typographic errors, the most serious appears in a reference to *Bacterial and Mycotic Infections of Man*, supposedly edited by "Dubois, RJ" and published in 1848; Rene Jules Dubos actually published this book in 1948. Eighteen illustrations, all accompanied by descriptive text, are a new feature of this edition. References are given at the end of each chapter, mostly to secondary sources, and the index is adequate. Although not authoritative, *Plagues and Poxes* is entertaining and concisely offers much information that is not easily available. Thomas G. Benedek, M.D. Copyright © 2005 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS.

"Plagues & Poxes is entertaining and concisely offers much information that is not easily available. -- New England Journal of Medicine" "The book will be useful to those wishing to gain the perspective of a distinguished scholar on the fascinating relationships of human behavior, disease, and history... The essays are well written, referenced, and filled with fascinating details of the people and events involved." -- Journal of the American Medical Association "...for those who want to know the long-range history and what general progress has been made in the containment or treatment of many of the world's worst diseases, or for those interested in the relationship between human progress and the increase of certain types of disease, it would be a good choice." -- About.com "Serves up a rich feast of disease, danger, and death... What sets this book apart is breadth wed to

concision." -- Foreword Magazine "Dr. Bollet's collections of essays...deals elegantly and excitingly with a wide range of topics... excellent accounts of the illnesses of various presidents of the U.S..." -- Medical History "Bollet's book bring[s] a new perspective on disease to the general reader."-- Midwest Book Review "Do not start this book at night unless you suffer from insomnia; the stories are spellbinding to anyone who loves history."-- Doody's Reviews "An excellent medical-based survey which charts the rise and change of disease patterns throughout human history."-- The Bookwatch "...well written and interesting...a perfect companion on a transcontinental flight."--American Journal of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation "A fascinating account of how diseases change as a result of both known and unknown factors." --Brit. J. Clinical Practice (Brit J. Clinical Practice 20100503)

got this for a history of medicine course i took in my senior year of college. it actually is pretty gnarly if you get into it. i usually dread reading textbooks; this is one of those exceptions. basically, if yr taking a history course & yr teacher assigns you this, consider yrself lucky.

The "M.D." stands prominently after the author's name on the cover of this book and that's probably for a good reason: this text would fit better in the pages of a medical journal than as a book for public consumption. As a reader with a science background (albeit in physics) I am always ready to read a new science book. I also have an interest in the study of disease, particularly as it relates to the historical development of the human race. Still, this book was a disappointment. Consider the following passage from the chapter on anthrax: "Most naturally occurring anthrax strains are sensitive to penicillin, which historically has been the preferred anthrax therapy. Doxycycline is the preferred option among the tetracycline class of agents, because it has been proved efficacious in monkey studies. Other members of this class of antibiotics are suitable, and animal studies suggest that such prophylaxis should be effective. The fluoroquinolone antibiotics (such as ciprofloxacin [Cipro[®]]) should have equivalent efficacy, but no data are available..." Not only is this dull prose, it is unimportant to the thread of the story that Dr. Bollett claims he is telling. And this is only one of the most prominent examples of poor prose (besides making me wonder whether or not Dr. Bollett has any financial interest in Cipro). According to the introduction, this book is a revised edition to an earlier book on the same subject. I didn't read the first edition but I have a feeling it is much better than this book. Mainly because the last three chapters on emerging diseases are the poorest in the book and are probably new to this addition. As are what I expect are new paragraphs near the end of every chapter that relates how every single disease in history could be weaponized. It is

disturbing to see a book like this play on people's fears of bioterrorism. It's unfortunate because the historical sections of the book which are the bulk of the first parts of each chapter are well done if a bit dry. Dr. Bollett has turned the traditional view around a bit by considering how human history has impacted epidemic disease rather than the other way around. If the book had stayed on this path it would have been decent, if not great. Somehow this new edition has lost its way.

Amazing quality! Super quick shipment!!

This is an excellent and ambitious book with an interesting choice of diseases, 8 infectious, 5 noninfectious, and 3 intentionally induced and newly emerging. I didn't find it dry at all. It will appeal perhaps more to people with medical backgrounds but it is readable by anyone. The author is knowledgeable and writes well. Books like this one are of great importance as we face the coming years and possibilities of dreaded diseases. Midwest Independent Research, educational websites. Health care information, mwir-healthcareinformation.blogspot. There are book lists, including one on infectious diseases.

The writing is a bit dry and medical, but the basics of the major epidemic diseases of our era are explained fairly well. Great for a quick examination of these little monsters!

The impact of human history on epidemic disease is related in Dr. Bollett's *Plagues And Poxes*, an excellent medical-based survey which charts the rise and changing of disease patterns throughout human history. From key events which sparked changes and people involved in them to how infectious diseases have been stopped, *Plagues And Poxes* provides both a case history and a social analysis, written by a medical doctor who has been a member of many prestigious medical history societies.

I am using this book in a class I am currently teaching. It's fine, gives a decent rundown on the major plagues and includes non-infectious plagues which adds another dimension to the text. Still, it is a tad brief for anything much other than an overview.

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