epidemiology and infectious pathology topics are presented in a technical but understandable way so that readers unfamiliar with medical subjects can achieve a widespread view of the challenges and the burden that control of infectious diseases (emerging and re-emerging diseases) pose to nations.

Cooperation and interdisciplinary collaboration are strongly endorsed as the only way to achieve a timely and prompt response to international emergencies, whether they are caused by natural disasters, bioterrorism, epidemics or pandemics.

The SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic, which spread rapidly but was controlled by means of a worldwide cooperative network, is held up as a model to adopt and improve upon. In contrast, the lack of awareness of the threat posed by the slow spread of HIV in the 1980s is an example of why we should be suspicious whenever mass production of a biological product is launched into the world market. With these two main lessons learned we should be capable of preventing future events of this kind.

According to the author, "The emergence of new human infections and the globalization of commerce are not threats, but realities that will mold the way the people of the world live their lives and conduct business in the decades to come."

To tackle the challenge of emerging infections, private and public interests must have the same goals. A basic infrastructure, in terms of clean water and sanitation, public health surveillance and intervention for human and animal infectious diseases, must be promoted in those countries where it is not currently available. Transparency and sharing information on infectious diseases and product safety is a must if we are to create efficient partnerships that can ensure global safety.

In all, I found that the book raised interesting questions on infectious diseases and offered new insights into what future challenges may face mankind.

Núria Torner

Social work and social exclusion: the idea of practice

Sheppard M. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, £55.00 (hardback). ISBN 0-7546-4768-4; 0-7546-4770-6.

This book aims to clarify the principles and characteristics of social work by explaining its relationship to social exclusion. The author provides a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between social work and social exclusion, with its emphasis on those aspects of social exclusion that belong to the area of attention of social work. This is a logical choice

from the social work perspective, but rather disappointing for those who are more interested in the phenomenon of social exclusion than in the specific elements of social work. The author claims in the preface to have written this book with different groups of readers in mind: not only readers with an academic interest in the principles and practice of social work, but also a wide audience in social work and other related areas such as social policy. To me, as a reader belonging to the latter group, the first part of the book is indeed interesting. Unfortunately, as it continues, the book becomes more and more a plea to justify the status of social work as a distinctive discipline. This may be very important for readers working in the academic field of social work, but does not appeal to readers with a general interest in social exclusion and related concepts. I would advise the first group of readers to read this book from beginning to end. The second group will profit most from the subject index; they may be advised to check the reference list carefully, since Sheppard has done a good job in providing an overview of the most essential literature regarding the themes (e.g. need, authority and choice, empowerment, coping and social functioning) described in this book.

Mieke Rijken

Hong Kong's health system: reflections, perspectives and visions

Edited by Gabriel M Leung, John Bacon-Shone. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006, US\$59.50 (hardback), pp 546.

This book, comprising 22 chapters within four parts, is the output of a multidisciplinary think-tank of academics, who aimed to provide an evidence base to support health care reform in Hong Kong. Like many nations, Hong Kong has recently experienced health care reform at an unprecedented rate. For example, in 2002 the government introduced charges for accident and emergency department patients. The aim of this book is to provide guidance and examples of international best practice to policy-makers and health care managers, and to impart knowledge about Hong Kong's health system to postgraduate students.

The collection begins with historical overviews of demographic transitions and the epidemiological, technological and economic forces underlying change, focusing on universal concepts of equity, market structures and patient choice in health care decisions. Attention is paid to integrating East and West philosophical thought in Chapter 3. An interesting focus is on the Confucian tradition, in which there is recognition of governments' duty to protect the welfare of their people and

an emphasis on individual effort and self-reliance. This is in contrast to the polarised political debates in Hong Kong between liberals, who favour a laissez-faire, individualistic approach, and collectivists, who prefer reform that regulates providers. This chapter has useful applications to international debates about health care reform. Chapter 6 is of particular interest as it describes comparative health system models in East Asia. Many of these have pursued systems of social insurance in recent years, and share the universal problems of rising costs and attempted cost-containment, alongside ageing populations. The chapter includes a useful summary of the advantages and disadvantages of social insurance-based systems. The role of public health in social justice is presented in Chapter 7, which is critical of public health and its failures in Hong Kong. The authors support a historical analysis of public health, and funding for public health information gathering, in order to improve policy formulation. Public health is portrayed as being at the crossroads in Hong Kong.

The next sections of the book focus on organisation, management, quality indicators and targets and financing issues. An international perspective is frequently adopted, for example on managed health care and potential transferability to Hong Kong. The UK National Institute of Clinical Excellence is held up as a model for evidence-based guidance on health technologies. Chapter 11 focuses on long-term community, residential and hospital care for elderly people. While lip service is paid to the need to promote "healthy ageing", the chapter is oriented towards traditional models of geriatric medicine, although a case is made for integration with community care. The need to delay disability is referred to, although the solution is seen in narrow terms of modified housing and age-friendly communities. While these are important, there is scant reference to Western responses to the costs of an ageing population (e.g. policies to promote "active ageing" and increase disability-free life years).

This book covers so many topics, that, while fascinating, depth is frequently sacrificed. However, as is stated in the epilogue "... contributors have attempted to highlight key questions, rather than provide complete answers ... presented as material to be reflected upon, perspectives to be debated and visions that challenge orthodox thinking ..." (p. 485). While this can be frustrating for the reader who wants to understand more about the health care system in Hong Kong, it does raise awareness of key health care reform issues and perspectives. For this reason, it is a book which merits a place on the reading lists public health courses in the West, where awareness of health care reforms often tends to be restricted to the USA and Europe.

Ann Bowling