



Eras in Epidemiology: The Evolution of Ideas

Mervyn Susser, Zena Stein

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At its core, epidemiology is concerned with changes in health and disease. The discipline requires counts and measures: of births, health disorders, and deaths, and in order to make sense of these counts it requires a population base defined by place and time. Epidemiology relies on closely defined concepts of cause - experimental or observational - of the physical or social environment, or in the laboratory. Epidemiologists are guided by these concepts, and have often contributed to their development. Because the disciplinary focus is on health and disease in populations, epidemiology has always been an integral driver of public health, the vehicle that societies have evolved to combat and contain the scourges of mass diseases.

In this book, the authors trace the evolution of epidemiological ideas from earliest times to the present. Beginning with the early concepts of magic and the humors of Hippocrates, it moves forward through the dawn of observational methods, the systematic counts of deaths initiated in 16th-century London by John Graunt and William Petty, the late 18th-century Enlightenment and the French Revolution, which established the philosophical argument for health as a human right, the national public health system begun in 19th-century Britain, up to the development of eco-epidemiology, which attempts to re-integrate the fragmented fields as they currently exist. By examining the evolution of epidemiology as it follows the evolution of human societies, this book provides insight into our shared intellectual history and shows a way forward for future study.

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