

BOOK REVIEW

The Pandemic Century: One Hundred Years of Panic, Hysteria and Hubris by Mark Honigsbaum

Hardback, 392 pages
Hurst Publishers
April 2019

This book attempts, successfully, to describe selected epidemics and pandemics that have occurred from the Spanish influenza of 1918 until the present. The book consists of about 300 pages of tightly packed text in nine chapters with a comprehensive reference list. Many aspects of pandemics are described, including the scientific, medical, sociological, epidemiological and political. The book is extremely informative and well researched.

The first chapter discusses the Spanish flu that may have killed up to 100 million people worldwide. The search for the disease's aetiology was complicated: primary bacterial infection as a supposed cause was a confusing blind alley; the true viral cause of the infection was unknown. The virulent nature of the virus strain involved is still not fully understood. Overcrowding and troop movements contributed to the extent of the 1918 pandemic. The world remains under threat from an overdue, potentially devastating flu pandemic that, with so much air travel, could spread around the world within days.

The next chapter discusses a plague outbreak in Los Angeles in the 1920s and the complex politics, logistics and steep learning curve that accompany any life-threatening outbreak. The role of the media in spreading both information and misinformation is presented. The USA still has reservoirs of plague bacilli in animals and occasional human cases appear. Subsequent chapters cover outbreaks of psittacosis from parrots, Legionnaires' Disease, HIV, SARS (which came and went), and, of course, recent Ebola and Zika virus outbreaks.

The similarity of human behaviour in epidemics and pandemics is striking. The panic amongst the population, the confident information from "experts" that proves to be incorrect, the political repercussions and conflicts. At the same time, there is optimism as crises enable discoveries. Honigsbaum has written a very useful book that is thought provoking and will hopefully prepare us for tackling "Disease X" – an unknown future cause of a serious epidemic – in an optimal way.

One criticism is that there are no illustrations to help break up the mass of written information, although I like the way in which the detail in the text is interspersed by relevant anecdotes. The book is not light reading, but I found it fascinating and think it will appeal to the enquiring reader who is willing to persevere.

William Dibb
June 2019

Published online at www.bshm.org.uk.