

BOOK REVIEW

Preventing the Next Pandemic: Vaccine Diplomacy in a Time of Anti-Science by Peter J Hotez

Hardback, 208 pages

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Peter Hotez is a distinguished US vaccine developer, public advocate and science envoy. In this book he discusses the rising challenge of infectious diseases resulting from a combination of 21st-century forces and argues that disease catastrophes might be prevented by 'vaccine diplomacy' defined as 'simultaneous scientific and diplomatic opportunities between nations with an overriding objective to jointly develop and test vaccines as a means to promote health, security and peace'.

The first part of the book serves as an introduction and establishes the author's credentials as an expert on neglected tropical diseases and as US science envoy to the Middle East and North Africa. He reviews the role of global alliances in reducing childhood infectious diseases between 2000 and 2015. Since then, progress has stalled and even reversed in some cases because of war and conflict, shifting poverty, increasing urbanization, climate change, nationalism and anti-vaxxers. After a very brief history of vaccination, Hotez draws inspiration from Albert Sabin who developed an oral attenuated polio vaccine by collaborating with Soviet virologists during the Cold War.

The core of the book presents an authoritative and convincing overview of how current global conditions are driving the emergence and reappearance of infectious diseases with special attention to the Middle East, Africa and the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America. The reader is left in no doubt of the seriousness of growing problems in those regions and the dangers they signal to close neighbours including Europe and the US. The author considers the difficulties in creating new vaccines for neglected diseases and the value of coalitions seeking to accelerate the development of vaccines for global health, including vaccines against SARS-CoV-2. He dedicates one chapter to the challenge posed to global health security by anti-vaccine misinformation and his efforts to combat it.

Hotez believes that vaccines not only save lives and reduce suffering but also promote international peace and prosperity. It is hard to argue against beneficial exchange of scientific know-how between nations, large scale immunization as a life-saving intervention, and eradication of smallpox. But the book ignores the alternative use of vaccine diplomacy, that is a means to promote political influence as a foreign policy objective, which serves to question if not undermine its humanitarian intentions.

Preventing the Next Pandemic cogently argues that science and vaccine diplomacy have a key role to play in tackling the threat of infectious diseases. The book will appeal to anyone interested in contemporary issues relevant to pandemics but its limited and selective presentation of vaccine history may not commend it to historians of medicine.

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