Understanding epidemiology and its contribution to public health

Concepts of epidemiology: integrating the ideas, theories, principles, and methods of epidemiology; 3rd edition

Bhopal RS
Oxford University Press; 2016
(£32.99; 480 pp)
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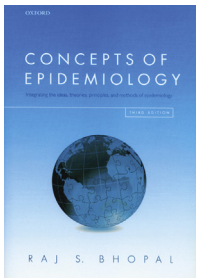

As an academic, choosing a textbook to recommend can be a daunting task. In the age of the internet, how does a textbook compete and maintain the interest of students? The answer lies in how the book is constructed. A good textbook has the ability to build on concepts in more detail, bringing together theory and history to illustrate points in depth.

The latest edition of *Concepts of epidemiology* by Bhopal does just that. Bhopal — who is professor of public health at the University of Edinburgh and honorary consultant in Public Health at the Lothian National Health Service Board, United Kingdom — takes a novel approach to the science of epidemiology, moving away from using the toolkit and calculation focus often observed, to build a strong case for the discipline. In contrast to other textbooks, study design and key approaches to use when summarising data are not presented until late in the book. The early chapters instead focus on defining epidemiology, exploring what is meant by a population and delving into how epidemiology can be used to describe variation, error, bias and confounding. Other chapters explore causality and how epidemiology fits with clinical medicine and social sciences to provide evidence for decision makers. Many chapters in the third edition have been revised and updated to further improve clarity. New material includes a well illustrated section on directed acyclic graphs, and a section on the ethical and practical challenges arising from data linkage studies.

This approach, building a case for why we should use epidemiology, before delving into the mechanics actually works very well. It is well suited to postgraduate students who wish to develop a deeper understanding of epidemiology and its contribution to public health. Academics will find the examples and diagrams within the book which are useful for teaching.

Concepts of epidemiology is very comprehensive and will appeal to those with a special interest in the field. Undergraduate students or busy clinicians undertaking further study may find the length of the book a little daunting. The chapters do stand alone though, so if you are looking for a textbook to invest in and use over time, this would be a good choice.

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