

This textbook is close to being complete; it is a joy to browse through and to read; it is very well illustrated, and the tabulated material is truly educational. A complex volume such as this one must be enormously difficult to edit and the editors deserve credit for what they have achieved. I hope that this book will become one of the major reference sources for information on asthma and COPD and that it might have the potential to serve a much wider medical community than respiratory textbooks usually do.

I am a little uncertain whether physicians with a more general background or primary care physicians will find it easy to navigate through this book for clinical problem-solving. In addition, the allergists' community may want some more detailed

information on immunotherapy and specific therapies to modulate IgE-mediated allergic reactions. The chapter on "cardiovascular effects", under the heading of therapies for asthma and COPD, might seem misplaced and a bit out of context. Also, I was at times uncertain whether the main aim was to present asthma and COPD in an integrated way or whether the primary intention of the book was to highlight their similarities and differences. This is the only point where I think this excellent book sometimes loses focus, but given the vast number of contributors and topics that is probably too much to ask.

Chronic respiratory diseases are here to stay. An increasingly ageing population and the growing awareness of the huge presence of non-communicable diseases and chronic

conditions in the developing world have prompted a number of global activities. WHO's programme launch of the Global Alliance against Chronic Respiratory Diseases (GARD, <http://www.who.int/respiratory/gard/en>) is leading the way and will help health-care organisations, governments, and the professional respiratory societies to define research agendas and a road map for improved clinical care under varying health-care systems. Up-to-date information, reference sources, research, educational material, and affordable textbooks, such as the one discussed here, are all essential in shaping a necessary way forward to fight chronic respiratory diseases worldwide.

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**Breathing Space: How Allergies Shape Our Lives and Landscapes**  
Gregg Mitman. Yale University Press, 2007. Pp 336. US\$30.00. ISBN 0-300-11035-9.

## In brief

### Book Treating the symptoms

In *Breathing Space: How Allergies Shape Our Lives and Landscapes*, Gregg Mitman explores the epidemic growth of allergic disease in the USA from the late 1800s to the present day. He uses individuals' experiences to describe the complex relations between the ecology of animal, plant, insect, and man-made allergens and environmental, medical, and cultural factors.

This frustrating, and occasionally deadly, malady has seen an endless stream of solutions, ranging from annual "hay fever holidays" at resorts, government-mandated herbicidal assaults on ragweed, the development of air-conditioned homes, and various medications. Mitman contends that efforts narrowly focus on treating the symptoms of allergies, yet have failed to address the issues underlying their acquisition. He suggests that we need to address how our changing

environment—physical, biological, social, and economic—has helped to create the USA's allergic landscape.

Mitman discusses how hay fever was initially thought to be a curse that only afflicted white, urban professionals. However, hay fever flourished among people from rural populations when they, too, moved into cities. Subsequently, allergies and asthma have disproportionately affected poor, non-white urban populations who often have inadequate access to medical care and may live in areas nearby polluting industries. Wealthier people may seek relief from allergies by moving cities, changing building materials for their homes, altering what they buy, and changing their lifestyle, but impoverished urban residents do not have access to these alternatives.

Allergy has also been a growing market, making pollen both a poison and profitable entity. Today, more

than 50 million Americans, including myself, suffer from allergies and spend billions of dollars trying to alleviate the symptoms. Although medications, such as antihistamines, are an easy pill to swallow for the luxury of getting on with our daily lives, they do not treat the causes of allergic diseases. Harder to swallow is the idea that true solutions for allergic disease include improvements in public health that address the structural inequities in housing, health care, building construction, and land use. Mitman's wide-ranging history of the complex cultural, social, and physical relations in the environment that have left Americans struggling to breathe is nothing to sneeze at. Unless the public health issues are addressed, this epidemic disease will remain unchecked.

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