

Story of 6 epidemics examines mobile germs and their victims

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

June 6, 2004 Sunday Five Star Lift Edition

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Section: A&E

Length: 554 words

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Body

"When **Germs** Travel: Six Major **Epidemics** That Have Invaded America Since 1900 and the Fears They Have Unleashed" By Howard Markel

Published by Pantheon, 263 pages, \$25

In this informative and important book, Howard Markel, a pediatrician and historian of medicine at the University of Michigan, recounts the history of six infectious outbreaks in the United States, each of which broke out in association with waves of immigration to the country. He writes of **epidemics** of trachoma, cholera, bubonic plague and typhus that occurred in association with immigration a century ago, and of outbreaks of AIDS and tuberculosis that have occurred in recent times. For each **epidemic**, he weaves a vivid description of the natural history of the disease with an account of how the disease entered the United States, spread and ultimately faded away.

Markel portrays these events through engrossing **stories** of individual **victims** who suffered the disease -- the East European rabbi with trachoma, the Haitian refugee with AIDS, the Chinese immigrant with bubonic plague. He describes the response of public-health officials to the **epidemics** and shows how these outbreaks shaped our society and changed our world. The continuity throughout these episodes is America's habit of blaming the **victim**. We pride ourselves on being a nation of immigrants, yet we have a tradition of scapegoating newcomers when **epidemics** strike. Markel, who writes regularly for The New York Times and other general publications, tells these **stories** in an enthralling fashion. His ability to make medicine accessible and understandable to lay readers is remarkable. Yet, the book is also thoroughly researched, well argued and replete with insightful, nuanced interpretations. Scholars will find it of value as well.

Perhaps the book's most notable feature is its illumination of public-health issues of the present. As Markel shows, the great obstacle in establishing effective public-health programs is apathy. Successful public-health programs are silent in nature. Few diseases break out, and those that do are quickly contained. Such successes easily lead to public overconfidence and the tendency to stop investing further to keep our public-health programs strong. Yet, as Markel writes: "We never really conquer **germs**. We merely wrestle them to a draw." The recent worldwide outbreak of SARS is only the most recent reminder of the truth of this observation.

What is needed in the 21st century, Markel argues, is a strong, cooperative, international system of public health. In the book's epilogue, he espouses a United Nations proposal for a globally funded public-health program in which rich nations help pay for public-health initiatives in poor countries. One hopes that Markel's message will be heeded. As he points out, today, as in the past, **germs** travel. The only difference is that, in an era of globalization and rapid international travel, an infected individual in one country can travel to another and spread the illness before it becomes clinically apparent. The health of a remote village in Rwanda or China now has serious implications for those of us living in New York, Los Angeles -- or St. Louis. Appalling public-health conditions in Third World countries can be ignored by wealthy nations only at their own peril.

Notes

BOOKS Dr. Kenneth M. Ludmerer is professor of medicine and professor of history at Washington University.

Graphic

photo

Classification

Language: English

Subject: DISEASES & DISORDERS (90%); ***EPIDEMICS*** (90%); INFECTIOUS DISEASE (90%); PUBLIC HEALTH (90%); IMMIGRATION (89%); PUBLIC HEALTH ADMINISTRATION (88%); AIDS & HIV (74%); TROPICAL DISEASES (73%); HISTORY (72%); EYE DISORDERS & INJURIES (70%); HEALTH DEPARTMENTS (68%); PHYSICIANS & SURGEONS (68%); REFUGEES (67%); TUBERCULOSIS (66%)

Company: UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN (58%); UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN (58%)

Organization: UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN (58%); UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN (58%)

Industry: HEALTH DEPARTMENTS (68%); PHYSICIANS & SURGEONS (68%)

Geographic: MICHIGAN, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (94%)

Load-Date: June 6, 2004