

BOOK REVIEWS

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Health, Prevention, and Economics DAVID R. COHEN, JOHN B. HENDERSON. Oxford University Press, 1991. No. of pages: 175. ISBN 0-19-262166-1.

There has been growing recognition of the role health promotion and disease prevention can play in improving the health of populations. Despite the policy rhetoric, resources devoted to prevention remain a small proportion of the total health care budget. A number of countries, including the United Kingdom, are, however, attempting to reorientate health services by introducing health targets. Economic analysis and evaluations could be important aids to decision makers at a time when resource allocations are being reassessed and priorities for health promotion are being discussed. The reissue of *Health, Prevention, and Economics* in paperback is, therefore, both timely and welcomed.

The book, mainly targeted at non-economists, covers the whole spectrum of prevention issues from the impact of prevention on the macro economy to economic appraisals of secondary and primary prevention. Chapter 9 contains a very useful description of various behavioural models and discusses the possible links between economic and social and psychological theories of behaviour. Throughout the book there is a strong policy emphasis. The basis of national prevention programmes and priority setting in prevention are the subject of one of the concluding chapters.

The accessibility of this book, both in terms of style and price, makes it a very useful addition to the few texts available for introductory economic courses. It could be used as a short course text although some of the chapters might best be reordered for teaching purposes. Chapter 3, in which the smoking example is used to illustrate market failure arguments for government interventions, is particularly successful. It was surprising that the approach of using a single example to explain the principles of economic appraisal was not employed.

The discussion of economic appraisal is a major part of the book and is covered in four of the ten chapters. The initial chapter gives a review of different economic appraisal techniques. This is followed by two chapters reviewing case studies of primary and secondary prevention policy options. Aspects of the evaluation process are considered in more depth in the last of the

evaluation chapters. While these chapters cover most of the major appraisal issues those who are looking for a manual on how to undertake evaluations of health promotion or prevention programmes will be disappointed.

In the case study chapters many examples and the references provide a useful resource for public health specialists. The case studies are presented to illustrate how economic evaluations can aid policy choice but there is a danger that, for the uncritical, inappropriate generalised conclusions may be drawn from the quoted specific studies. A more critical perspective is taken in the last of these chapters, with issues illustrated with reference to a number of previously quoted case studies. To aid discussion of the principles fewer case studies discussed in depth would be advantageous; but of course this would be at the cost of losing the comprehensiveness of the review chapters. However, there is a danger that the case studies will become outdated and it is to be hoped that success of the paperback edition will encourage an early revision of the contents of these chapters.

Both economists and public health analysts will find some controversial points in the book. The authors take a strong supportive stance on the need to discount health benefits; see, for example, Chapter 10. This issue is particularly important when evaluating prevention programmes where the health benefits in terms of disease prevention make take many years to be realised. While this issue seems set to be debated fiercely in this Journal and elsewhere, non-economists reading only this book would think there was unanimity of view among economists. A second issue is that the focus of the book is disease prevention rather than the broader concept of health promotion. Immediate positive health benefits from a change in lifestyle may be more influential in securing behavioural changes than the knowledge of the risks of distant health damage. This concept is given a brief mention in the first chapter and is considerably different from 'utility in anticipation' discussed in Chapter 9.

With its reissue as a paperback, those training in the public health and health promotion field should ensure they read this useful contribution to the study of health promotion.

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