How do we ‘do’ public health?


Have you noticed an increase in the number of patients complaining of back problems after introducing water recycling strategies, or perhaps you are wondering about the link between hospital admissions and secondary complications of diabetes? You work under the biopsychosocial model and apply evidence-based practice principles to your work, but is there more that you can do beyond treating the individual? This book helps you to explore this question as it is aimed at students and the beginner practitioner in public health. It focuses on providing a clear description of what can be a confusing mix of activities, concepts, and organisations identified under the banner of public health, and the authors take this further with an emphasis on the effort required to do public health. The book provides an in-depth but clear starting point for physiotherapists who want to move beyond the concept of tertiary care intervention, and are ready to contribute to the health of the population on a primary care level.

There is an enormous amount of material which will be new to the reader with a beginning interest in the area; the authors have recognised this and employ two different and effective types of case studies to make the material accessible and engaging. At the beginning of each chapter is a small vignette on the issues covered in that chapter with a challenge for the reader to reflect on. The second type of case study is threaded throughout the text, appearing in a box which gives relevant, Australian examples of public health which enhance the content of the chapter. The reader may be surprised by the history and extent of successful public health activities in Australia when they are presented in this comprehensive manner.

The book is divided into five parts with the first clearly describing for the novice what public health is, its history, and current status in Australia. This section is put together well to provide the overall context that physiotherapists practice in today. Parts 2 and 3 cover the concepts and infrastructure of public health and will take the reader new to this area some time to consider and absorb. These sections cover the material at a greater depth than some of the other texts available and may be more useful to the physiotherapist manager than the new graduate. Part 4 presents public health interventions and discusses amongst other things the role of prevention with chronic disease self management and health promotion concepts. The final part looks to the future of public health and as such is again of more relevance to managers.

Despite the depth of content described above, the book lacks the level of detail of the theories (in areas such as health and human behaviour, communication to effect change, organisational change and public policy change, Nutbeam and Harris 2004) that would be helpful for physiotherapists new to this area to assist them in actually implementing a change in their practice.

This text does not tell you how to do public health, but it does open your mind to a broader understanding of health that forms an effective basis for further reading. As the future of the current health systems in Australia continues to be debated widely, the book gives physiotherapists an understanding of how they can contribute to the evolution of the current system to one which has a stronger focus on principles of sustainability, equity, and equality in a way that enhances the health of the population and not just the individual patient.

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Reference