

Book Review

Leprosy, Racism and Public Health. Social Policy in Chronic Disease Control. Zachary Gusso

The author of this book is a retired American psychologist/anthropologist who became aware of leprosy when he moved South to the Louisiana State University, School of Medicine. He presents a detailed history of attitudes to leprosy and their causes in nineteenth-century America. He suggests that the stigma associated with leprosy in America and parts of Europe was not the product of a long tradition, but was reactivated in the nineteenth century. Colonial expansion took Europeans and Americans to countries where leprosy was endemic and the disease became associated in the public mind, and more importantly in the minds of public health administrators, with the dirt and depravity of 'uncivilized' and 'inferior' people. The fear that, with the immigration of foreign populations, the disease might contaminate the civilized world, resulted in intense leprophobia among the Western nations by the turn of the century. Norway 'the enlightened kingdom' was the exception and there is a chapter devoted to the humane way in which leprosy patients were regarded even after Armauer Hansen's studies suggested that leprosy was a contagious disease.

The author carried out field work at Carville in the 1960s and there are two chapters detailing the history of the leprosarium there. In his preface, he says that Stanley Browne told him that if he wanted to understand leprosy he should venture beyond Carville. He travelled through Tanzania, on a WHO grant, studying the delivery of leprosy services and visited ALERT, Ethiopia but no data from Africa appear in the text. Perhaps that is material for a future book.

This book is probably too long and there is a good deal of repetition, but I found it fascinating as a social history of a disease which people seemed to fear above all others.

Jill Curtis

Published by Westview Press, San Francisco and London.