

BOOK REVIEWS

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EUROPEAN COMMUNITY ATLAS OF 'AVOIDABLE DEATH'. W. W. Holland (Ed), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988.

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The volume has been set up to produce an overview of what is termed 'avoidable deaths' in the European Community (EC) (prior to the acceptance of Spain and Portugal as members). It covers deaths from typhoid, whooping cough, tetanus, measles, osteomyelitis, tuberculosis, cancer of the cervix and uterus, Hodgkin's disease, rheumatic heart disease, respiratory diseases among children, asthma among younger people, appendicitis, abdominal hernia, cholecystitis, hypertensive and cerebrovascular diseases in middle ages, and maternal and perinatal mortality. In addition, data on total mortality, and an 'avoidable death summary score' are presented.

It can of course be debated at length whether the chosen causes of death represent an appropriate or exhaustive selection of avoidable deaths, but in my opinion the chosen set seems to be a fairly relevant selection of causes.

The geographical units used are mostly counties of some kind, mostly in the range of a few hundred thousand to one or two million inhabitants. Germany is a notable exception with the 'Bundesland' as a unit, with populations from a million up to 17 million, making all but very pronounced variations in Germany disappear.

All data are shown both in tabular form and as shaded maps based either on SMRs or directly standardized rates (standardized to EC population). The maps are presented both as maps of the entire EC with EC average as reference, and as national maps with the single country as the unit of reference. The shadings of the maps are chosen so that all shades are reasonably represented in each map, meaning that all maps show where the differences are, but with the side effect that the comparison of the different causes of mortality in terms of variability in the EC is hampered.

The most interesting maps are definitely the maps of the whole EC. Large parts of Britain and Ireland and southern Italy have SMRs for respiratory diseases among children that are higher than 150, whereas the appendicitis SMR is above 150 in most of Germany. The perinatal mortality varies remarkably little; most of the rates are in the range of 12 to 24 deaths per 1000 births, but there is a clear tendency that the rates are highest in south-

ern Italy. Denmark has a remarkable record of mortality from cancer of the cervix; an SMR of 246 relative to the EC level. This is because of the very high incidence of this disease in Denmark, and apparently the lack of effective organized screening for it. The maps and tables contain a wealth of interesting information on the mortality variations and it would be far beyond the scope of this review to try to summarize it all.

The text explains very clearly that the avoidable deaths do not necessarily have one simple explanation; each death is a result of several 'misses' in the social and health systems, a combination of failures to prevent the appearance of conditions leading to disease, and failures to provide the correct diagnosis and treatment of each individual. The atlas is therefore not only a descriptive statistics publication, but a publication focusing on areas of social welfare and health care where results should be readily obtainable after some scrutiny into the courses of events leading to deaths.

In the text it is suggested that the atlas should be expanded with investigations into the trends in mortality in the EC, and that studies explaining the differences in mortality by aggregated data on disease incidence, socio-economic factors etc. be conducted to shed light on the causes of the mortality differences. The most promising suggestion, however, is to conduct case-studies on the separate 'avoidable' deaths, which could point directly to factors of importance for the fatal course of events, and thereby lead to preventive measures.

From a descriptive point of view it would be interesting to include the non-EC countries in Europe, that is, the Nordic countries, Switzerland, Austria and the eastern European countries, although the latter may prove an insurmountable task.

The atlas is an important publication for anyone involved in the administration of health care systems in the EC; it gives a good overview of (some of) the problems, and will hopefully force responsible politicians to do something about (some of) the outstanding health problems in Europe.

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