

► **The Deadly Truth: A History of Disease in America**

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Gerald Grob's comprehensive look at the interplay between society, public health, and evolution begins in America's pre-Columbian days and moves through the various stages

of the country's growth, including the move from rural to urban life, and the Industrial Revolution.

During the pre-Columbian days of exploration in the Americas, the introduction of disease followed a regular pattern: Expeditions from other countries would bring infectious elements to the indigenous people. Soon after these foreign explorers stepped onto New World land, these infectious diseases would make their way into the native population, eventually causing virulent epidemics that left the survivors in a weakened and vulnerable state. Smallpox, for example, is thought to have arrived in Mexico in 1520 aboard a Spanish slave ship and quickly spread north, according to Grob. In fact, the author says that smallpox, which has a mortality rate of 70%, "undoubtedly had the greatest impact on the native inhabitants of the Americas."

During the colonization of the Americas, many initial settlers were shocked to find that America was different from the health utopia being promoted by some early British explorers, many of whom had vested business interests in the colonies and needed a settlement population in order to make money. Grob relates that William Wood wrote one of the first descriptions of the Massachusetts colony when he returned to England in 1633. He wrote of an environment populated by "healthful bodies", where the indigenous people did not suffer from common

European diseases, such as consumption, gout, toothache, pox, and measles. He also claimed that many native inhabitants lived to the age of 100, which must have sounded like a fantasy to British citizens, who were used to comparatively short life spans thanks to the filth and disease they endured during the 1600s.

The reality, of course, was much different. Early settlers faced not only the challenges associated with establishing a life and developing a food supply, but also a new environment filled with infectious agents to which they had no immunity. During the 16th and 17th centuries, the settlers adjusted to this new environment, a process known as "seasoning". While their bodies adjusted, however, this early population experienced high mortality rates. And as the population and economy boomed in the colonies, this seasoning would happen in waves, with each new population adjusting to the new environment. Grob claims that in the 1800s, a host of new diseases, such as dysentery, emerged in densely populated towns like Boston, Philadelphia, and New York.

By the mid-1800s, America was still predominantly a rural nation, but urban areas were growing at an alarming rate, taking a significant toll on the mental and physical health of their occupants. In 1790, there were only 6 cities with more than 8000 residents; by 1850, there were 85 urban areas with more than 8000 residents. In fact, by 1850, New York City had more than 500,000 residents. Although the building of railroads and canals meant new economic opportunities, the public health of urban citizens seemed to decline just as there were more jobs with decent wages that promised an improved standard of living. But crowded housing and the lack of hygienic conditions made city living hard for most people, especially rural immigrants who had not been exposed to the microbes present in the city's contaminated water supply.

Westward expansion in America also brought its own challenges and left in its wake millions of casualties blamed on

infectious pathogens. The development of vaccines and antibiotics, as well as other medical advances, helped in the disease wars. In addition, Grob emphasizes the primary role that epidemic management—quarantines, disinfection interventions, and a greater government role in sanitary reform (which led to the creation of sewage systems)—played in eradicating diseases such as yellow fever, smallpox, and measles.

Although science promises us that our lives are getting better and longer thanks to medical and technological advances, Grob reminds us that the tenets of public health, including the improvement of sanitary conditions, development of antibiotics, and implementation of government regulations to control industrial labor conditions, have also played a significant role in improving longevity and health.

Can we wipe out disease? Grob is cautious as he lays out his arguments in *The Deadly Truth*. While looking at how far we've come, he also has an eye on the challenges that await us. Is it responsible, then, to speak of one day eradicating disease from the face of our planet?

—REVIEWED BY JULIE McDOWELL

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