

Ruminations on Aboriginal health

The causes of policy failure – a doctor's perspective

Jonathan Hunt

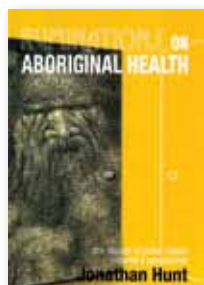
Australia: Jonathan Hunt, 2011

ISBN 978 0646 552 491, \$17.95

Given the title's assumption of policy failure, it could be anticipated that this book documents a journey from being passionate about Aboriginal health to becoming jaded in just 7 years. However, this autobiographical story is more about a doctor who respected and valued his Aboriginal patients yet felt unable to improve their poor health.

Early in his medical career, Dr Jonathan Hunt completed his general practice training and then stayed at an Aboriginal community controlled practice servicing an Aboriginal community in a provincial centre along with visitors from remote areas of northern South Australia. 'Ruminations on Aboriginal health' was apparently written as a means to debrief from that experience.

After giving an historical context to both his career and the local community, the author discusses the key issues he has observed. Dr Hunt



expresses a frustration with inadequate resources to treat overwhelming health problems – a story more commonly heard from those who have worked in third world countries. Reeling from this culture shock within his own country, Dr Hunt then meanders through problems associated with Aboriginal community controlled health organisations, the difficulty engaging patients to manage their own health, pervasive death, endemic alcohol caused morbidity, systemic government inaction and the lack of a functional response to mental illness. The somewhat disorganised collection of stories and reflections on these issues may be a product of the intense work in which Dr Hunt had been engaged.

The book elucidates some important points within Aboriginal health. Aboriginal community controlled health organisations are prone to conflict between doctors and management. It is also noted how dependence on nonrecurrent government funding tied to government-determined programs undermines the community's ability to respond to local needs in local ways.

Dr Hunt is not so focused on service delivery however, to neglect the factors that impair

Aboriginal health. Our professional knowledge of how to treat disease is poorly translated into how to treat patients who reside on the other side of a wide cultural gap. Alcohol is identified as a potent determinant of disease, injury and social dysfunction, yet there are inadequate resources for either treatment or prevention.

At the most proximal level, Dr Hunt identifies colonisation as a root cause for much of the indigenous health gap. Unfortunately, as illustrated in the book, colonisation continues to be an active force. Dr Hunt argues that unless we understand the diseases we see in the Aboriginal population as merely symptoms of societal ills, and are then motivated to address those ills, improvement in Aboriginal health is unlikely.

The book provides a vivid, personal description of medical work in a distinct part of Aboriginal Australia. However, the frank, even provocative exploration of underlying issues is pertinent to cross cultural medicine generally. This book contributes to debates about both how to improve Aboriginal health and how to shape our national identity.

Robert Johanson
Scarborough, Qld

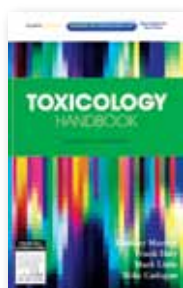
Toxicology Handbook, second edition

Lindsay Murray
Frank Daly
Mark Little
Mike Cadogan

Australia: Churchill
Livingstone, 2011

ISBN 978 0729 539 395, \$80.00

The second edition of the 'Toxicology Handbook' is a distinct improvement on its predecessor from 2007. Some of the deficits identified in the first edition have been addressed. This edition is 62 pages longer, due to the welcome



inclusion of relevant new material. In the new edition, there is now a section on dangerous plants, fungi and biological toxins, and an expanded list of individual drugs for discussion. As well as this, inclusion of the vernacular for some illicit and prescribed drugs is a useful addition to the text. Some important topics, such as ciguatera toxin and an exploration of the HazChem codes are not included, and this book would benefit from their inclusion.

Some minor aberrations from the first edition remain and relate to the index. For example, the mainstream term 'toxidrome' does not appear in the index. Also, a search for 'charcoal' or 'ipecac'

will not find them. They are actually indexed as 'activated charcoal' and 'syrup of ipecac'. This distinction is not intuitive for many readers and may cause confusion during a search.

Combining the sections on snakebite, envenomings and antivenoms seems logical, and editing out areas such as 'presentations of drugs', 'currently in MIMS', would save space. Apart from these comments, the second edition of the 'Toxicology Handbook' supplements the small but growing canon of Australian medical literature and should be a benchmark for future Australian toxicology publications.

Peter Thomas
Brisbane, Qld