
Sex-selective abortion in India is a sad commentary on economic progress intertwined with concomitant social backwardness. This is an emotive and touchy issue. Often the debate is pitted as ethical and moral propriety vis-à-vis reproductive rights of individuals. The declining sex ratio is a vast and challenging topic with complex historical moorings, societal and cultural norms over a period of time, the political economy of gender equality and public health aspects.

The book is a collection of essays from authors with backgrounds in sociology, economics, political science, development and the medical field, especially public health. Individual contributors have looked at the topic through the prism of their respective fields of expertise. As an opening to the first chapter, the editor quotes Boulding, ‘The real world consists not of numbers but shapes and sizes.’ This sets the tone for the rest of the book, which has heavily relied on qualitative research methods. However, individual authors have used the Census of India, National Sample Survey (NSS), fieldwork and survey data, and archival material to provide quantitative evidence to establish their points of view.

The book is divided into three sections and an annexure. The first section contains 4 chapters documenting the existence and putative causes of the declining sex ratio in India, and the role played by new reproductive technologies that have become available in the past few decades. The section is amply supported by analysed census data that can act as a good reference material for other researchers in this field. The second section, again containing 4 chapters, deals with the social, economic and legal contexts that have a bearing on the missing girl child. Interestingly, there is a chapter that looks into the issue of adoption as well. The last section (3 chapters) deals with female infanticide and foeticide in the economic context. It provides a refreshing new perspective on the government’s programme on reproductive and child health, and the role of health workers in altering the sex ratio. Some thought-provoking suggestions to prevent female foeticide have been listed, which merit consideration. The annexure contains the entire text of the Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) Act, 1994 along with the amendments. In the end, the reader is left to assimilate the viewpoints expressed in the various chapters and synthesize the final opinion on his/her own.

Most of the chapters are referenced extensively. The book contains more than 50 tables that have been culled out of various datasets. These tables are good reference material for other researchers working in the field of gender imbalance in India. With renewed interest in the topic and the current change in social awareness, the book is a welcome addition to the body of knowledge. The photograph on the cover page of the book showing a splatter of blood drops is revealing of the editor’s position on the topic.

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The Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences (MGIMS), Sevagram is the first rural medical college in India. Over the years, whenever I have had the good fortune to visit it, I have always noted that there are some outstanding physician–teachers on the campus. Not only are they excellent at the practice of scientific medicine; they are also ethical and are role models for their students. A book on bioethics from this centre would thus perhaps be expected to be exceptional. Unfortunately, this is not so.

What I would have liked to see, especially given the subtitle of the book, ‘with real life examples for better understanding’, is a collection of examples that physicians in MGIMS themselves have faced. However, one gets the feeling that most of the examples are run of the mill; originality is lacking. For instance, the cases refer to patients with conditions such as Huntington and anorexia nervosa, both of which are way below in the list of common Indian diseases. Why were common diseases in India not used to discuss ethical issues? I was surprised to see some distinctly American terminology—use of the word ‘attending’ for consultant/doctor (p. 25), for instance. In the same vein, the cover depicts a western physician, dressed in a suit, examining a child. Even most of the images of patients and doctors inside the book are clearly from the affluent West. Surely the book is meant for Indians, not Americans! There is a reference to gonorrhoea being a notifiable disease to the public health authorities (p. 68). There are chapters on organ transplantation and stem cell research (with a major error—there is mention of a Korean stem cell research...
team creating cell lines from embryonic stem cells). That this was fraudulent research seems to have missed the attention of the authors. Another serious defect is that most of the chapters are 2 to 3 pages long and offer only cursory introductions to ethical issues. The references are inadequate and incomplete.

To be sure, there are some plus points in the book. At least some of the case histories are appropriate and educational. The chapters on medical student issues, end of life, and medical mistakes are useful. However, overall, I believe that given the admirable background of the institution and its physicians, it would be appropriate for the authors to work towards a book that is relevant to Indian conditions.

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The perception of ageing and old age has changed very little since the early days of human civilization. In the modern-day social context, being old means to be ill, non-productive, poor, weak, demented, unattractive, dependent and abused. In such a situation, it is no surprise that most people view old age with apprehension and trepidation. Though there would be many who enjoy the twilight years of life in health and vitality, it is a reality that older people in most communities have a large burden of ill-health and disability, and socioeconomic disadvantage. Societies with a high proportion of older people in the population (as in most European societies) would like to change the negative perception of old age as soon as possible; at least that is what this book tries to achieve. The book provides the European perspective of ageing as the title mentions and may not at a glance appear to be relevant to developing societies, where the large majority of older people live.

I enjoyed three of the essays: ‘The biology of ageing’, ‘Researching ageing’ and ‘Health and dependency in later life’. Rudi Westendrop and Tom Kirkwood have summarized the available knowledge about the genesis of ageing. The chapter attempts to clear some of the confusion in the area by putting the existing theories in their place, e.g. evolutionary theory for population ageing, systems theories for ageing of the individual, cellular theories for ageing of the organs, tissues and cells, and molecular theories for proteins and nucleic acids. The authors have applied Rothman’s model (modified by Westendrop) of ‘component cause’, ‘sufficient cause’ and ‘physical change’ to understand the complex model of normal ageing, age-related diseases, and death as an effect of various ‘sufficient causes’ and ‘component causes’ having an onslaught on a system with ‘physical changes’. The chapter also deals with two very interesting issues: lifespan and longevity and compression of morbidity and mortality, i.e. living the extra years gained with the help of advances in technology and science in good shape or poorer state of health and functionality. The debate on ‘compression’ has been mostly settled with good quality evidence from the research of Fries and his group. The chapter concludes by highlighting the gaps in critical knowledge required to prevent deaths after the age of 75 years. However, it is interesting that a large majority of deaths in the 70+ years in developing societies, though preventable, are not prevented in the existing healthcare system.

Anyone engaged in ageing research or research involving the elderly knows the pitfalls in the area. The essay ‘Researching ageing’ deals with theoretical issues in gerontology research and also provides workable ideas in planning a research project in this multidisciplinary area. The authors have done well to emphasize the need for doing multidisciplinary research to find answers to many of the questions in ageing research.

Health and functionality in old age is a major issue in gerontology and the lack of it is the basis of geriatric medicine. The essay ‘Health and dependency in later life’ uses the concepts of Herzlich regarding health and illness very emphatically to support its arguments. Herzlich concluded from his research that health can be described as ‘vacuum’ or lack of illness; as ‘reserve’ that is an asset; or an ‘equilibrium’ that is a notion of internal harmony and balance. Similarly, he observed that illness or disease can be perceived as a ‘destroyer’ limiting the individual’s ability to perform daily activities and responsibilities; a ‘liberator’ relieving the individual from all responsibilities and as an ‘occupation’ in which the individual only concentrates in recovery from disease or amelioration of symptoms or disabilities. The essay deals with some important aspects of disability and physical dependence in old age with good evidence and then goes on to deal with the inevitable issue of long term care in the scenario of changing family structure. The evolution of long term care in Europe with all its strengths and failings provides good examples of things to be done and avoided in developing societies. This chapter provides a neutral account of the European experience in old age care.

The editors conclude the book with an essay ‘Ageing into the future’, which identifies challenges and opportunities in the field of ageing and old age care in future for European societies which may become relevant sooner or later for every society.

This book is a collection of 14 interesting essays backed by a large number of references. Researchers and academicians in the field of gerontology and geriatrics will find it interesting and informative, and it is a must for beginners in the field.

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The dynamic nature of the field of public health is a well appreciated fact. The authors have on the one hand tried to approach several old, yet unresolved and unaccomplished, issues in public health, such as poverty and geriatric health, through newer evidence. At the same time, they have highlighted upcoming issues in the field such as prison health, health of refugees and health costs of terrorism; thus opening up new vistas to an already multifaceted discipline and putting greater challenges in our endeavour towards Health For All.

The book is divided into five sections, which essentially tackle independent issues:

1. Theory and Concepts in Promoting Public Health—introduces the historical and theoretical context of public health;
2. Deconstructing and Reconstructing Public Health—challenges the basic concepts of public health;
3. Researching Health—analyses the links between research and current practice, showing how research influences public health policy initiatives;
4. Promoting Public Health through Public Policy—examines the global context of promoting public health through policy;
5. Promoting Public Health at a Local Level—explores public health and health promotion in a participatory and community context.

Although much of the evidence in the text has been drawn from the developed world, there are lessons to be learnt from developing countries too, what with India experiencing the dual problem of communicable and non-communicable diseases, but riding high on a strong political commitment for public health in the form of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). The success stories seem replicable in our setting also. Although chapters such as ‘The anthropometry of Barbie: Unsettling ideals of the feminine body in popular culture’ may be dismissed as unimportant by way of conventional thinking, these nevertheless could show up in the future as important public health issues. It is through chapters such as ‘Healthy nightclubs and recreational substance use: From a harm minimization to a healthy settings approach’ and ‘Dirty whore and invisible men: Sex work and the public health’ that the authors succeed in driving home the point that public health professionals cannot afford to be wedded to a particular organizational form, structure or ideology and that an effective public health strategy requires a minimum capability and capacity to respond to change. It is encouraging that there is a chapter on ‘Yoga and promoting public health’.

The authors’ aim was to reflect on and challenge the current thinking in the field of multidisciplinary public health and they have been successful in this task. The book provides enough material to stimulate the minds of young public health professionals and to acquaint them with the current concepts using a refreshingly new approach. The readers will benefit from the evidence and numerous examples used by the authors.

The text is lucid and makes for interesting reading. This book forms a part of an Open University Course in the United Kingdom ‘Promoting public health: Skills, perspectives and practice’, a third level undergraduate course. The general appearance of the book is good and the typeface is legible. The book is priced heavily. It may not be a part of a personal collection, but deserves a place in the library to equip public health professionals with the latest thinking on important issues in their field.

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In many western countries, cancer is the second most common cause of mortality after cardiovascular diseases. New developments are occurring rapidly in cancer diagnosis, treatment and prevention. Clinical oncology is now a separate specialty. In India, most oncologists could be categorized as general oncologists because the concept of organ-specific cancer care, though present, is confined to a few tertiary care centres. Most physicians or trainees working in the field of oncology are required to deal with different types of cancers, thus they need to keep themselves abreast with the vast knowledge in clinical oncology. The authors have tried to provide a comprehensive volume to address this need.

This is not a textbook but more of a question–answer book. By the authors’ own admission, this book is for self-assessment: ‘...thus the readers can evaluate their knowledge with established knowledge in cancer and its related subjects.’ The intended readership is primarily students preparing for various competitive/entrance examinations. Practising physicians will benefit by the new information this book offers. The authors have attempted to cover most aspects of clinical oncology. The topics vary from pathology of cancers to organ-specific cancers on the one hand to targeted therapy on the other.

The strength of the book lies in a detailed explanation of the answers supported by reasons. These explanatory notes are useful. Explanation of some questions provides a brief revision of the
whole topic. This is particularly well done for topics such as lung cancer and haematological malignancies, e.g. answers to questions 164–6. The reader would have benefited more if advice on selected/further reading were also given, especially as there are no references.

If the aim of the authors was to provide students of oncology a new book on MCQs where answers are supported with reasons, it has been fulfilled. However, this cannot be termed a textbook.

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The authors of this well illustrated book on the clinical approach to a surgical patient state that the aims of this work are to ‘present to the students a new methodology and technique in clinical surgery, which can transmit required knowledge in such a concrete fashion which will leave an indelible impression in the students’ mind’. Although the stated aims are rather eloquent and ambitious, this book presents important symptoms of the major systems, describes and analyses them, and lists alongside important conditions that manifest with these symptoms. Elicitation of clinical signs and manifestations of clinical conditions are shown by excellent colour photographs. However, as per accepted norms, it is advisable to conceal patient identification in photographs where the breasts and genitalia are shown.

The information contained is by and large accurate and up-to-date. However, the Manchester classification for cancer breast is outdated and could have been dropped. The photograph showing auscultation for bruit in the thyroid shows the stethoscope over the lower lateral part of the lobe, instead of over the superior thyroid artery at the upper pole. The Kocher test for tracheal narrowing is demonstrated by pressing simultaneously from both sides to compress the trachea, instead of pushing just the enlarged lobe medially.

The main objective of basic medical education is to train the student to talk to and examine a patient in such a way that the full history of the patient’s illness is obtained, the abnormal physical signs elicited, a differential diagnosis made, and further investigations and treatment options suggested. This book rightly emphasizes the importance of proper techniques of history-taking and clinical examination. Important points, lists and classifications have been put into special revision panels. Differential diagnosis and basic diagnostic investigations are also covered. This book should serve to remind medical students that the doctor’s skill and competence at the bedside and in the office are, at all times, of primary importance and must take precedence over all ancillary methods of investigation, however sophisticated and technically advanced they may be. Overall, it is an excellent book for undergraduates to learn the basics of clinical surgery during their clinical postings.

This book, with its large print, makes for easy reading. The page layout and presentation of material through numerous good quality colour photographs and excellent typeface are attractive, although there is smudging of colour on a couple of pages.

The price of Rs 490 is justified and I would strongly recommend the book for all medical college libraries.

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