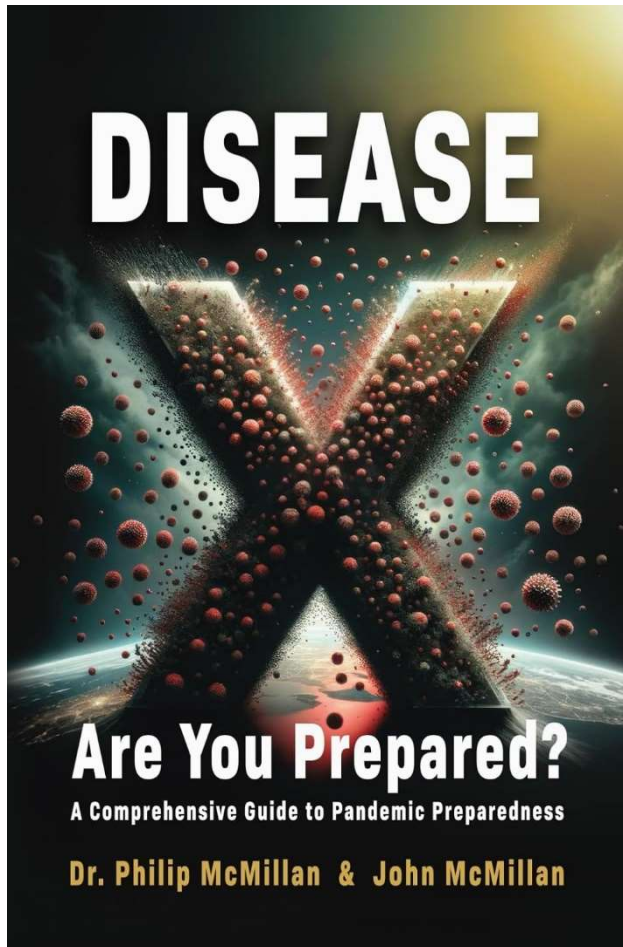


‘Disease X’ concept taken from the World Health Organization

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“Disease X: Are You Prepared?” by Philip McMillan and John McMillan. Covent Garden, London, UK: Lumienta Publishing, 2024, 348 pages, \$18.99 (paperback).



“The Covid-19 pandemic, caused by a previously unknown virus, changed the world in ways most of us could hardly have imagined,” Philip McMillan and John McMillan observe near the beginning of “Disease X: Are You Prepared?” their instructive new explanation guide, road map and survival handbook. “In early 2020, experts writing in the journal *Cell* even suggested that Covid-19 could be the first Disease X.”

“The idea isn’t taken from a science fiction novel or a doomsday scenario – it’s an actual concept proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2018,” the authors continue. “Disease X refers to the possibility of a global epidemic caused by an unknown pathogen, one for which no treatment or vaccines exist. The idea sounds frightening and should inspire reflection, but isn’t meant to predict doom; instead it’s a call to action.”

And “a call to action” is an apt description of this deceptively complex exploration of a reality of the modern world that most of us never contemplated with any real seriousness until that fateful first few months five years ago. The McMillans take us on a fascinating journey that

could also serve as a short course covering everything you need to know about viruses and the dangers they pose to our collective survival in the 21st Century. But instead of dwelling on the negative aspects that often permeate these kinds of efforts, their tone is decidedly optimistic.

“Disease X” is comprised of an introduction and 13 relatively comprehensive chapters that cover virtually every aspect of viral infections, from individual strategies for prevention and treatment through policy recommendations aimed at keeping the public as safe as possible from future outbreaks, which are seen as inevitable. The manuscript is appropriately researched with eight pages of references at the conclusion of the main narrative and illustrated with numerous diagrams and drawings that help the reader get a better grasp of the concepts and ideas being articulated. The prose, which integrates biology with psychology, is readily accessible by a general audience, which is one of the book’s most appealing features.

The first five chapters are devoted to getting the reader up-to-speed on the lessons we learned from Covid-19, the mechanisms involved when viruses infect and subsequently spread throughout the population, and how physicians in conjunction with medical researchers attempt to combat the

deleterious effects that are often precipitated when these kinds of diseases are encountered. The next two chapters are centered on individual as well as collective prevention, after which the McMillans focus their attention on response planning and post-infection treatment options. Finally, they conclude the book by panning out to the larger implications.

As I made my way through this highly revealing volume that should interest us all, I was struck by the deep understanding of their subject matter the authors consistently exhibit. Moreover, the connections to the proverbial real world we increasingly live in were unmistakable. Witness the following from “The Power of Community,” the tenth chapter and one I found particularly applicable and intriguing:

“A key aspect of managing such crises lies in reliable information. Misinformation thrives during moments of uncertainty. Long-standing community figures like family doctors, teachers, and local leaders will help separate fact from fiction, creating clarity amid the chaos. These moments of truth-telling will empower individuals to make informed decisions and combat fear. Older generations, too, are likely to play a significant role. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many grandparents became virtual tutors, helping children navigate remote learning. Imagine their influence this time around as they support communities through tasks like mentoring, virtual planning, or even correspondence that reminds others they’re not alone. Their wealth of experience is a resource too valuable to ignore.”

There’s a lot to unpack there, but the potential payoff is well worth the investment. Our ultimate survival is closely related to our ability to acknowledge and deal with reality, something that has been somewhat lacking lately in our approach to decision-making and problem-solving. Keeping politics out of science will be essential if we are to overcome the challenges that will inevitably come with Disease X. The importance of intergenerational families is also evident in many of the strategies outlined in the book.

A physician in the UK with over 20 years of medical expertise, Philip McMillan is a 1994 graduate of the School of Medicine at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. He is an international authority on dementia, having presented in Singapore, Japan, Italy, Ireland, UK, Canada and China. John McMillan is an editor with Lumienta Publications and the technical director with Skymap Survey; he studied at University of the West Indies, Sessions College, New York, and the University of Edinburgh.

As the McMillans astutely observe, in the final analysis, we truly are all in this together. No superficial barriers or isolationist strategies will succeed in containing the next global pandemic. And as always, it will be those who are least prepared who will suffer the most.

“The burden of Disease X, as with previous health crises, is likely to fall hardest on the most vulnerable,” the authors surmise in “Health Strategy, Regulatory Roles and Compliance,” the concluding chapter. “Those living in underserved communities, dealing with preexisting conditions, or working on the frontlines will need targeted support. Combating the virus cannot simply mean stopping its spread; it must also address the economic, social, and emotional toll that health emergencies bring. Relief measures such as financial aid and accessible care services will be critical for preventing the collapse of already fragile systems and ensuring that no one is left behind.”

If you are one of those readers who has always felt that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, you’ll definitely want to pick up a copy of “Disease X.” You won’t be disappointed. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.