

# Collection compiles studies on public health in America

"The practice of public health has traveled a long and often storied path," James Holsinger notes at the beginning of "Contemporary Public Health: Principles, Practice, and Policy," the new volume he edited for the University Press of Kentucky. "In the United States this path has often been rocky, causing progress to come in fits and starts."

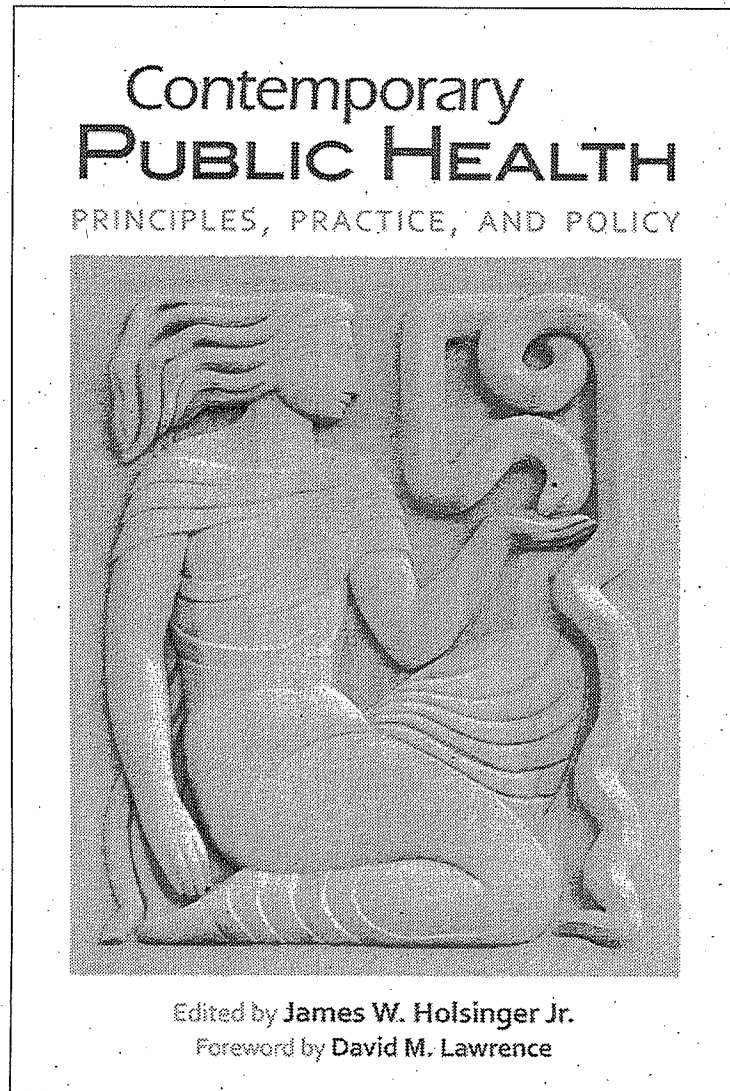
Holsinger is the Charles T. Wethington Jr. Chair in the Health Sciences at the University of Kentucky. He spent 26 years in the Department of Veterans Affairs and was appointed to the post of undersecretary for health by President George H.W. Bush in 1990. Holsinger also served as chancellor of the University of Kentucky Chandler Medical Center from 1994 to 2003 and was secretary of the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services from 2003 to 2005.

Again, "Contemporary Public Health" is an edited volume consisting of 13 chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. To his credit, Holsinger put together an exceptional array of authorities who bring enormous expertise to the subject of health care in America – including how we got to this point and what the options are as we race toward the future.

The 24 contributors Holsinger assembled for this monumental project all hold prestigious positions at various institutions and agencies across the country. Their insights and diverse perspectives bring a richness and depth to the material that would not have been possible had the author chosen to write the book from his singular vantage point. Moreover, the book is constructed in a manner that flows logically across the chapters, and, as you might suspect, each is painstakingly researched with an extensive list of supportive citations.

In Chapter 1, "The Social and Ecological Determinants of Health," Steven H. Woolf and Paula Braveman set the stage for much of what comes later in their book by laying out the cultural influences and philosophical ideologies that form the underpinnings of the health care debate currently playing out in the political arena. Woolf is a faculty member and director of the Center on Human Needs at Virginia Commonwealth University; Braveman is a professor and director of the Center on Social Disparities in Health at the University of California-San Francisco. At the heart of their discourse is the "health-in-all-policies" movement.

The movement "encourages policy makers to consider how the health of the general public and vulnerable populations might be affected by proposed policies, regulations or legislation," Woolf and Braveman explain. "The health-in-all-policies approach has been adopted by large and small communities throughout



"Contemporary Public Health: Principles, Practice, and Policy," by James W. Holsinger Jr. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013, 295 pages, \$40.

the United States and at the state level. At the federal level, the health-in-all-policies approach is evident in initiatives by the Obama administration and in provisions of the Affordable Care Act that promote interagency collaboration and coordination on cross-sector policies related to healthy housing, obesity, and other public health priorities."

I found Chapter 11, "International Lessons for the United States on Health, Health Care, and Health Policy" by Stephen C. Schoenbaum, Robin Osborn and David Squires, to be particularly eye-opening. Schoenbaum is a lecturer at Harvard Medical School; Osborn is a past director of fellowship programs at the Association for Health Services Research; and Squires is a senior research associate in the International Program in Health Policy and Innovation at the Commonwealth Fund. Their opinion of the performance of the U.S. health care system is less than stellar, especially when compared to the financial resources we expend to maintain it.

"For many years, health care has been significantly more costly in the United States than in other countries," the co-authors assert. "Nonetheless, overall U.S. health system performance and population outcomes often fall short of achievements in other countries. Among 16 member

countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States had the highest death rate from conditions that are potentially preventable or treatable – the so-called mortality amenable to health care."

In the final analysis, the authors of this excellent tome are guardedly optimistic in their assessment of our collective future.

"The second decade of the 21st century is an extraordinary time for the public health profession," Holsinger and his colleagues write near the end of the book. "If public health can break out of old molds and old modes of operation, there is every reason to believe that public health will continue to fulfill its mission to improve community health status."

If you are interested in more than a superficial and sound bite-driven discussion of the U.S. health care system, you really need to read "Contemporary Public Health." This comprehensive and thought-provoking book will definitely enrich your understanding of the disparity between where we are and where we potentially need to be on a topic that ultimately affects us all.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.