

Health Equity, Social Justice and Human Rights

Ann Taket

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This is a good book about an important topic: health equity. Inequities which are unfair and unjust are evident in societies and health systems all around the globe. Differences in life-expectancy, maternal mortality, patterns of preventable disease, and distribution of health-care resources are all around us. This list is endless, and this book attempts to chart an approach to this situation based on the twin concepts of social justice and human rights.



practice, policy advocacy, programme design, health planning and empowerment education. Particular emphasis is placed on *evaluating* the human rights effects of health and social policy in Chapter 6, which also presents an interesting seven-stage method of human rights analysis in this field.

This is an extremely involving passage in the book, which merits reading in full, if only because it addresses one of the recurring and most troubling questions in this field: while the theory of human rights is undoubtedly highly relevant in field of health-care, how precisely can we evaluate and re-design programmes in order to improve their human rights implications? In other words, how can health-care providers and planners operationalise the noble ideals underpinning concepts of human rights? The seven-stage method outlined in this book is very useful in this regard, not least because it combines high ideals with pragmatism in a field which is often filled with admirable rhetoric rather than practical suggestions.

Seven of the 12 chapters in this fascinating book are written by Ann Taket, Professor of Health and Social Exclusion, and Director of the Centre for Health through Action on Social Exclusion (CHASE) at the School of Health and Social Development in Deakin University, Australia. Professor Taket sets the scene at the outset by providing a concise overview of the field of health equity and places particular emphasis on human rights and the possibilities offered by a rights-based approach to health equity.

The global human rights system is examined in greater depth in Chapter 2, which commences with a quote from former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali, emphasizing the centrality of human dignity in considerations of social justice and human rights:

“Our contemporary human rights system is heir to demands for human dignity throughout history and across cultures. It expresses the enduring elements of the world’s great philosophies, religions and cultures.”

The theme of human dignity duly recurs repeatedly throughout this book. The general consideration of human rights is especially good here in this early section of the book, acknowledging, for example, the idea of ‘valid’ limitations on human rights in situations of ‘significant risk.’ These are difficult concepts which are well-articulated and explored in this chapter. With pleasing logic, Chapter 3 moves on to look at ‘regional human rights systems’ in Africa, the Americas, Europe and the Middle East, amongst other areas, while Chapter 4 examines ‘national and sub-national human rights systems.’

The issue of health equity moves to centre stage in Chapter 5, which articulates three components of the relationship between health and human rights:

- Violations of human rights can affect health negatively (e.g. slavery, torture);
- Promotion of human rights can affect health positively (e.g. through enhancing social determinants of health);
- Health development can affect observance of rights (e.g. reducing discrimination).

Chapter 5 goes on to outline various rights-based approaches to different aspects of health-care processes, including clinical

The next four chapters, written by various different experts, assume a similarly pragmatic approach to examine specific human rights and health issues in various settings, including the sexual and reproductive health needs of adolescents in South Africa (written by Melika Chiswell), a ‘mid-day meal scheme in Madhya Pradesh’ in India (Arjun Singh) and a ‘tobacco prevention strategy in Styria, Austria’ (Michaela Adamowitsch). From the perspective of mental health, the most interesting contribution is the ‘retrospective human rights analysis’ of the National MindMatters Project in Australia, a programme to promote mental health and wellbeing in secondary school students. Those designing similar programmes in other countries might find this interesting reading.

This extremely useful volume concludes with a thoughtful consideration of the ‘instrumental value of human rights in health’ by Brad Crammond and a concluding chapter by Ann Taket, entitled ‘Success or failure: How useful are rights-based approaches in public health?’

Overall, this book is a sturdy addition to the literature on human rights and health: it combines high ideas with pragmatism, and charts a reasonable course forward for practitioners concerned with the human rights implications of health policies and programmes.

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