

# Preface

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 provides the main impetus for this book. In this volume, I attempt to re-contextualize the role of medical geographers within the history of health care reform. The PPACA presents an excellent window of opportunity for medical geographers to contribute a patient-centric view of health care that takes into account a person's place history – i.e., where a person lives, works, and plays. As such, this book presents a new model of patient care that emphasizes a patient's geographic and medical history through a broad survey of seemingly disparate disciplines, such as disease ecology, GIScience, transportation geography, cultural geography, and geographic medicine. What emerges from this volume is a deeper appreciation of the challenges of national health care reform, and the importance of a new and emerging sub-discipline of medicine, known as geospatial medicine.

While this book is, admittedly, not an authoritative tome of basic concepts and developments in medical geography, it does present enough elementary material to enable the reader to grasp the significance of the current advances in medical geography and its historical context. New and timely topics such as disease surveillance in mass gatherings and knowledge discovery with 'big data' are explored, as well as the seemingly timeless topics of environmental health, disease ecology, and quantitative GIS research.

In addition, examples of successful research programs contributing to the cutting-edge of medical geographical research are described in these pages. The Center for Geospatial Medicine and the National Children's Study are large multi-site research projects (funded by the National Institutes of Health, or NIH) that are founded on the principles discussed in this volume. In addition, the Association of American Geographers and the NIH have collaborated on a report, entitled "Establishing an NIH-Wide Geospatial Infrastructure for Medical Research: Opportunities, Challenges, and Next Steps" that describes the importance of geographic thought and leadership in health-science research.

A book on medical geography is important if it can show that the discipline provides critical, life-saving insights about patient care and public health that are vital to human health. Health care services and delivery systems are rapidly changing, as

are ways in which patients are represented in these systems. As described in Chap. 2, the “ways in which patients and their medical conditions are represented, compiled and examined – from office visits and prescriptions records to daily personal blogs and newspaper stories – have also changed...” This volume goes on to explore how the diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment of chronic and infectious diseases can be significantly enhanced through the use of geospatial health intelligence in a clinical setting. The recognition of the importance of place history in clinical care has yet to be widely accepted and advocated by the medical community. Once this barrier of entry is removed, the possibilities for medical geographers to affect population health and patient care, through the use of geographic information systems (GIS) technologies, will be without bound.

I would like to acknowledge several people who provided the support and assistance necessary to the formulation, research, and publication of this volume. First, I extend deep gratitude to Frank Galgano and Sarah Wingo of Villanova University, for generously making the university’s library and archival resources available to me, during the research phases of this project. In addition to the excellent support staff at Springer, I would like to call out Rajeswari Balachandran, Marielle Klijn, and Robert Doe for their superb guidance through every facet of the book publication and marketing process. I would like to thank Paige Andrew and Katherine Weimer, who recognized the amount of time and dedication needed for this project and kindly allowed me to have a more relaxed schedule during my tenure on the editorial board of their journal. Finally, I would like to thank the many friends and family members who understood the value of medical geography and its meaning in my life.

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<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-12002-7>

Health, Science, and Place

A New Model

Blatt, A.J.

2015, XI, 133 p. 29 illus., 28 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-12002-7