of Claude Bernard or a description of the geography of yellow fever. The Oxford Companion to Medicine may suffice for the former [1], and the Cambridge World History of Human Disease will admirably answer the latter [2]. If the Companion Encyclopedia eschews the “potted biographies” and “quick guides to breakthroughs” expected in more traditional medical historical reference works, it is because this work has a grander encyclopedic purpose. It is intended to be a synthesis (“an overview, a stock-taking”) of a generation of historians’ understanding of medical history. Most of the names I recognized on the table of contents were those of individuals in middle age or near retirement. It is almost as if this work were a fin de siècle declaration: a summa of the state of medical historical thinking by some of its finest practitioners at the very close of the century.

“The seventy-two essays speak for themselves,” the editors have written, “Beyond argument they comprise the best and biggest body of expert research and interpretation in the history of medicine currently available” (p. 3). Whether there is indeed a logic that ties these essays together as a comprehensive view of medical history (as opposed to a collection of essays) is arguable. One cannot argue about the credentials of its sixty-eight contributors, however. Whatever the successes or shortcomings of the whole and its parts, the Companion Encyclopedia is as important a statement about medical historiography in our generation as it is about the history of medicine. Historians’ methods and points of view change; the scholarship and value of this work will remain.

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References


This book is organized to help people refine their medical questions, then seek the answers in the sources described. General medical questions (“where should I go to find . . . ?”) introduce broad categories such as food facts, dental health, diseases, and health care equipment. Each question is then answered with one or more sources and the number for a section in the next chapter where that source is described in detail.

The chapters are paired in question-and-answer fashion and cover printed sources, computerized databases, organizations, and governmental resources. Final chapters describe health centers, health professionals, clearinghouses, publishers, and related areas.

With the new Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations’ standards emphasizing patient information and discharge instructions, I would anticipate that even those hospital libraries that have not provided consumer health or patient education services in the past will be requested to do so in the future. Because setting up such a collection requires a large commitment of time and resources, a reference book of this type will prove invaluable to busy hospital librarians. It will be of less value to those already having large and active collections but may provide some gems that have not been found before.

I decided to approach this book as a member of the public and noticed first that it does not give answers but places to find answers. Therefore, if I had an urgent medical question, I might find this frustrating. (In our health education library, open to the public, we get between ten and twenty questions from the public per day, and most of those people want answers, not another source to call or write.) However, for those doing general research, or just beginning their quest, this book is a good starting point. It also helps a person begin to formulate questions and narrow choices.

I admired the way that information was clarified and divided into types of sources. A persistent lay person will probably come upon many unexpected sources of information on their topic, expanding and enriching their search.

I selected several typical consumer health information questions at random and found that resources were given for all of them. I learned that starting with the index was more direct than leafing through the questions in chapter 2 (“Where should I go to find health information in printed sources?”). I would have liked more synonyms in the index. For example, “anorexia” was there but not “bulimia,” “Depression” was available but not “bipolar disorder” or “manic depressive disorder.” I found “birth defects” but not “congenital malformations” or “syndromes.”

For some of the sources, more explanation may be needed for the lay public. For example, those not familiar with computerized databases might need more description of size, scope, and location (i.e., where to find them).
Finally, I know it is difficult to decide where to stop with this type of book, but I think that topics like violence and, especially, domestic violence, which the American Medical Association has declared to be of great medical significance, should have been included. It is a topic for which sources of information or assistance could be urgently needed.

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Grey House Publishing adds another fine directory to its health care reference library. The Complete Directory for People with Chronic Illness covers eighty-two chronic illnesses, such as agent orange-related injuries, and lyme disease, with each chapter covering one illness. The editor briefly introduces the chronic illnesses at the beginning of each chapter. National agencies and associations, state agencies and associations, books, children’s books, magazines, government agencies, newsletters, pamphlets, libraries and resource centers, research centers, support groups, hotlines, and videos follow the introduction. In the agencies-and-associations section, the title, address, phone number, and description of the association or agency provide beneficial information. The libraries-and-resource-centers section reports addresses, phone numbers, and services available. The book section shows the title, address, and phone number of the publisher, number of pages, cost of the book, and ISBN. Book description are advantageous. Magazine and newsletter entries note the titles, publishers, phone numbers, and descriptions. Support group and hotlines include address, phone number, and descriptions. Video entries contain title, address, phone number, description, and, occasionally, price. The directory also includes general resources, twenty different wish foundations, and a death-and-bereavement section.

The directory is available as a mailing list and in a computerized version in MS-DOS or ASCII formats, compatible with most computer database software. Following the index is a list of current directories from Grey House Publishing. These six directory entries include a brief contents statement and an ISBN. A free listing form encourages the addition of new listings or the updating of existing ones. The publisher provides a convenient 800 fax number for updates.

What other publications compare to The Complete Directory for People with Chronic Illness? That is a difficult question to answer. Because the information in the directory encompasses four diverse areas—associations, publications, research centers, and support groups—several sources, such as the Encyclopedia of Associations [1], Research Centers Directory [2], Resources for People with Disabilities and Chronic Conditions [3], and The Self-Help Directory [4] were reviewed for comparison. The Encyclopedia of Associations organizes information according to categories. The health-and-medical-organizations section comprises 286 pages, including names, addresses, phone numbers, and descriptions. Research Centers Directory includes different areas of research throughout the United States by category. Two sections incorporate the medical and health sciences and the behavioral and social sciences, totaling 413 pages. The name, address, phone number, and description format carry throughout this directory. The Resources for People with Disabilities and Chronic Conditions seems the closest source of comparison. This 215-page source contains chapters discussing disabilities such as hearing disorders, speech disorders, diabetes, epilepsy, low back pain, multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injury, visual impairment, and blindness. This book also lists organizations with addresses and phone numbers, publications, and tapes. The Complete Directory for People with Chronic Illness includes all these subject categories, with the exception of low back pain and speech disorders.

Most often, support group information limits itself by geographic boundaries and chronological age. The self-help group information focuses on a state-by-state basis. Currency presents a problem with support group literature. Information quickly becomes out of date. However, The Self-Help Directory makes all of the previous statements concerning support group publications untrue. Organized alphabetically, The Self-Help Directory collects 600 entries of American and Canadian self-help groups. Information on the purpose of each organization, services, up-to-date telephone numbers, and mailing addresses merit The Self-Help Directory (totaling 176 pages) consideration as a source for information on alcoholism, drug abuse, eating disorders, blindness, deafness, physical disabilities, and bereavement. The Complete Directory of Chronic Illness offers many listings of support group addresses, phone numbers, and 800-number hotlines nationwide.

Index arrangements vary among the directories. In The Complete Directory of Chronic Illness, the entry index assigns entries alphabetically and by publisher. The publishers are easily identifiable by bold-