



REAL GEOGRAPHY

EXPLORING THE GEOGRAPHY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

McGraw-Hill Higher Education

“Medical Geography” by Jon C. Malinowski, Ph.D.

This case study is a bit different from others in the series because it introduces you to a subfield of geography that is not covered in much detail in the text.

Medical geography is an important subdiscipline of human geography that focuses on both the geography of health and health care systems.

The geography of health, particularly disease, is often what people think of when medical geography is mentioned. This is the realm of geographic epidemiology. Epidemiology focuses on why diseases occur, where they occur, and how they can be controlled. Geographers obviously can contribute to this endeavor.

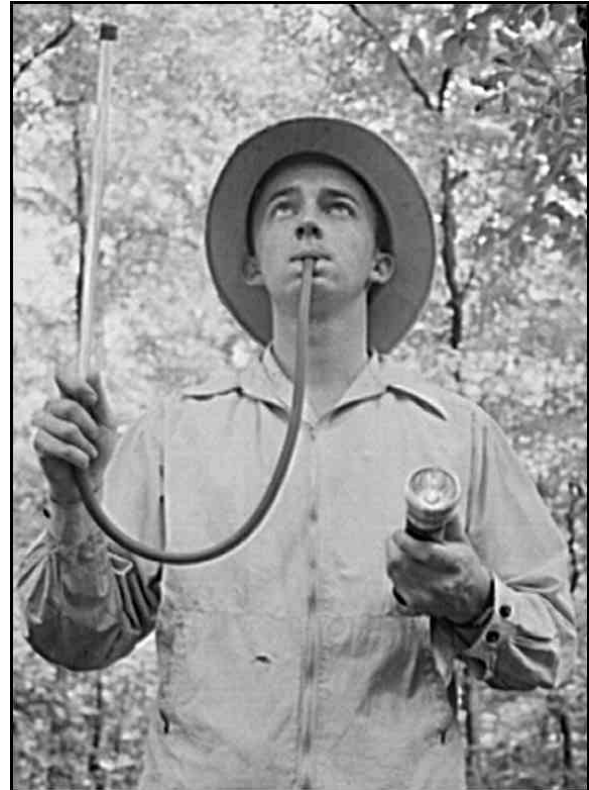
The classic example that illustrates the link between location and disease is the London cholera outbreak of 1854. Cholera is a gastrointestinal disease that causes severe diarrhea

and vomiting. Death is common due to dehydration. The disease is spread by contaminated water and food. In the 19th century, the squalid conditions of many urban areas made the disease a real problem that often killed thousands in a single outbreak.

At the time of 1854 outbreak, many doctors and scholars believed that cholera was an airborne disease. Snow believed it to be transmitted by water. He traced the outbreak to a well on Broad Street in Soho and convinced public officials to remove the pump handle. Although the epidemic was already subsiding, the removal of the pump handle dramatically reduced the spread of the disease.

Today, medical geographers are involved in studying the geographic distribution and spread of nearly every disease known to humanity. The development of geographic information systems has only increased the ability of the discipline to inform the health community. The diffusion of AIDS has been widely researched by geographers in the past 20 years.

Another area of medical geography is the geography of health



Collecting mosquitoes in a malaria control area Alabama, 1942

care and access to health care. Not everyone in a country has the same access to good medical treatment of facilities. Discrepancies can lead to uneven patterns in disease and health problems. For example, if women in rural areas do not have good access to a health clinic, they may be more likely to develop terminal breast can-

cer because it is not detected as early as in women in suburban areas.

Overall, medical geography can be an exciting and relevant career choice if you're interested in working with professionals in the health, health care, public health, and development communities.

Further Research

1. Research the geographic distribution and transmission of one of the following global diseases: HIV/AIDS, malaria, schistosomiasis, yellow fever, river blindness, or sleeping sickness.
2. What are the common health problems in your region or community? Are these problems affected by access to health care? How?

Links:

- John Snow Website <http://www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow.html>
- Medical Geography Specialty Group of the AAG <http://www.pop.psu.edu/aag/mgsg.html>
- Just Another Medical Geography Site http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Flats/7335/medical_geography.htm