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Medical Humanitarianism

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Pennsylvania Studies in Human Rights

Bert B. Lockwood, Jr., Series Editor

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Medical Humanitarianism

Ethnographies of Practice

Edited by

Sharon Abramowitz and Catherine Panter-Brick

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<FM-T>Foreword</>

<AU>Peter Piot</>

Having spent four decades of my professional life working on health issues and pursuing social change, I welcome this timely and thoughtful volume that engages at the intersection of medical science, social anthropology, and emergency humanitarianism. The field of humanitarian health, as it takes a higher priority on the global agenda, needs such sensitive and expert study.

As a practitioner and scientist in Belgium, in what was then Zaire, and subsequently through the United Nations on a global scale, I have learned the hard way about the extreme complexity involved in tackling the challenges of infectious diseases and epidemics, as well as the holistic nature of human health and well-being. This personal and professional journey has also compelled me to become a practitioner of the art of politics at all levels: from the micropolitics of the village or the laboratory to the international politics of energizing the United Nations system to respond to an entirely novel threat, namely the AIDS pandemic.

In turn, the politics of human health—especially in something as culturally complex and intimate as a sexually transmitted infection—has obliged me to study and practice the methods of social anthropology, becoming a reflective observer as well as a participant. Questioning the cultural and scientific premises of our approaches and being prepared to see the problem from others' points of view are necessary to tackle the biggest international public health and humanitarian challenges of our time.

Despite its significance, however, global health and humanitarianism has only recently emerged as a strong area of comparative and analytical research. As this field of scholarship



grows, we are seeing important quantitative and qualitative research, alongside the development of codes of practice. Going forward, the skills of the epidemiologist, ethnographer, and ethicist are equally necessary.

The chapters in this volume address many of the challenges I have encountered and struggled with during my career, and I am delighted that these issues are obtaining the scholarly attention that they warrant. They deal with people of diverse backgrounds, local and international institutions, social and political struggles, and encounters with political power, bureaucracy, and prejudice. They showcase the concerns of today's anthropologists, analyzing the encounter between different societies and institutions with their challenges of mutual comprehension and the effective application of science.

Some of the toughest issues facing physicians and humanitarian practitioners are addressed in this volume. For example, the decision by humanitarian organizations to withdraw from a project has rarely been scrutinized. It is an area that has largely been shielded from attention by closed-door institutional decision making, and it is good to see it discussed. The dilemmas and dangers faced by the local staff of humanitarian agencies—most starkly seen recently in the killings of local polio health workers in Pakistan—are another area that is given much-needed attention in this volume. Other chapters grapple with relations between foreign experts and their local counterparts, the application of technology and expertise to complicated local problems, and ensuring that humanitarian principles do not become dogmas. Contributions bring new methods to bear on familiar problems and familiar methods on new issues, such as applying the methods of infectious disease epidemiology to delve into shifting patterns of lethal violence in complex internal conflicts.

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Medical humanitarianism is emerging as a significant global agenda, and this book, with its particular attention to detailed ethnography, represents an important contribution to the field.