

## BOOK NOTES

Structured abstracts of information on newly published books, computer programs, selected Web sites, and other material are provided in this portion of Medical Writings. Order phone numbers and Web sites can be used to place orders directly with publishers.

### Critical Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Differences in Health in Late Life

Anderson NB, Bulatao RA, Cohen B. 752 pages. Washington, DC: National Academies Pr; 2004. \$69.00. ISBN 0309092116. Order at [www.nap.edu](http://www.nap.edu).

**Field of medicine:** Geriatrics and health equity.

**Format:** Softcover book.

**Audience:** Gerontologists, health services research, and public health investigators.

**Purpose:** To provide current evidence and critical overview of research on racial and ethnic differences in health in late life.

**Content:** The 5 main sections of this book cover topics such as the nature of racial and ethnic differences in health in late life; conceptual and methodologic challenges in this area of research; and the search for causal pathways among economic, social, behavioral, and biobehavioral factors and access to health care that may contribute to racial and ethnic differences in geriatric health and health care. The last 2 sections pose challenges for identifying effective interventions and perspectives from other nations that face similar problems.

**Highlights:** The book is concise, and it provides an up-to-date review of the ongoing research on racial and ethnic differences in geriatric populations. National and international experts in these areas offer findings from their current work, while sharing the challenges they have identified in this area of research. For newcomers to the field of health equity research in geriatric populations, the book offers immediate access to the scientific frontiers of research in this area.

**Limitations:** While the individual sections of the book provide good descriptions of specific research in this area, they do not adequately put into perspective the relevance of the writers' own research and findings on larger public health dimensions of race and ethnicity and health care. Furthermore, there is little coverage of research in disparities in geriatric medical care.

**Related reading:** The reader may refer to the 2002 Institute of Medicine report titled "Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care" (National Academy Pr, 2002). This report is edited by the committee on understanding and eliminating racial and ethnic disparities in health care.

**Reviewer:** Said A. Ibrahim, MD, MPH, Veterans Affairs Pittsburgh Healthcare System, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

### Powerful Medicines: The Benefits, Risks, and Costs of Prescription Drugs

Avorn J. 448 pages. New York: Knopf; 2004. \$27.50. ISBN 0375414835. Order at [www.randomhouse.com](http://www.randomhouse.com).

**Field of medicine:** Clinical pharmacology, epidemiology, public health, and internal medicine.

**Format:** Hardcover book.

**Audience:** Anyone interested in the issues surrounding prescription drugs in the United States, from practicing clinicians, health care administrators, health economists, and policymakers to consumers.

**Purpose:** To provide a comprehensive overview of the problems and opportunities occasioned by the pharmaceutical revolution of the last 50 years and the consequent proliferation of pharmaceutical choices available to doctors and consumers, and to suggest directions for the future.

**Content:** The book has 5 sections discussing critical issues in prescription drug use such as benefits (the shortest section!), risks, costs, information (who knows what, when they know it, and how information is or is not disseminated), and policy (a section that provides solutions to problems discussed). A prologue describes 6 hypothetical "cases" of prescription drug use and their outcomes. The book also contains an epilogue and a 15-page annotated list of references.

**Highlights:** Avorn has an easy-to-read style and a sense of irony and wit. He uses simple analogies and "cases" to highlight problems and clarify key issues. The book covers a wide range of issues, including discussions of pharmacology, epistemology, game theory, pharmacoepidemiology, and the processes of drug development, regulation, and marketing. All are seen through the eyes of an academic physician who appreciates the demands of day-to-day patient care. Avorn's passionate and well-informed opinions are clearly stated, with evidence supporting them. He goes beyond articulating the problems and makes many creative suggestions about how we can do better.

**Limitations:** Because the range of topics covered is so wide, those who already have expertise in an area such as pharmacology or epidemiology will find those sections of the book superficial and limited. The proposed solutions are multiple and often overlapping, and it is not until the final pages that some overall structure for a solution is proposed.

**Related reading:** Angell's *The Truth about the Drug Companies: How They Deceive Us and What to Do about It* (Random House, 2004) offers a more focused and polemical approach to the same problem. Readers interested in one aspect of the topics covered can look to many sources, such as Hilt's *Protecting America's Health: The FDA, Business, and One Hundred Years of Regulation* (Knopf, 2003) or Marks's *The Progress of Experiment: Science and Therapeutic Reform in the United States* (Cambridge University Pr, 1997).

**Reviewer:** B. Robert Meyer, MD, Weill Medical College, New York, New York.