The elements of preparedness for and response to bioterrorism and outbreaks of infectious diseases are well known: surveillance to quickly identify the problem, laboratory capacity for an accurate diagnosis, good and continual communication with the public, availability of specific countermeasures and the means to distribute them, appropriate non-pharmaceutical interventions, and the ability to take care of the ill safely. However, the ways that countries approach these tasks are different and greatly influenced by local conditions such as a country’s governmental system, assessment of risk, economic means, military civic engagement and capacity, and many other legal, cultural, political, and economic factors.

Biopreparedness and Public Health is a collection of essays that spells out these factors for a number of countries, with a focus on Southeastern Europe. The book is unusual because of the frank and unsettling assessments of the contributing authors. It is of interest and great value to those who plan responses to biological attacks or international outbreaks of infectious diseases as well as those interested in the legal and governmental laws and organizational structures that support a response to disease outbreaks.

The first part of the book reviews the context and oversight of biopreparedness. Chapters address the World Health Organization (WHO) and International Health Regulations, European Centers for Disease Control, and Southeastern Europe Health Network (SEEHN). It also includes chapters describing indicators that help responders determine whether an outbreak is natural or the result of biological attack.

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The heart of the book is the second part, which provides case studies from eleven countries that detail their governmental organization, legislative authority, agency responsibilities and medical institutions, and the role, if any, of the military in biopreparedness and response. The authors clearly conclude there is great variation amongst countries in terms of commitment, investment, experience, and risk assessment, although all have the structure and legislative mandates to prepare and respond to bioterrorism. For several countries, the military is best positioned to respond to a bio attack, and their plans rely heavily on this capacity. Notably, several contributing authors stated that their countries were not adequately prepared.

The country profiles identify interesting variations that some may consider “best practices.” Encouragingly, many best practices are found in multiple locations. However, not all of these practices are universally applicable due to differing social, cultural, and governmental resources. For instance, France has engaged in extensive bioterrorism planning including agent-specific guidelines as well as planning for more generic crises such as contamination of the food chain. Their national syndromic surveillance system consists of three simultaneous streams of data: emergency departments, emergency general practitioners, and mortality. The indications for military intervention in civilian emergencies have also been clearly established.

Israel conducts rigorous assessments of all medical care institutions through biannual surveys and drills. The Israeli system employs 300 parameters to measure preparedness for biological events, with follow up to insure that after-action recommendations are addressed. Israel has purchased mobile isolation rooms to distribute to hospitals in case of a biological emergency. In addition, they immediately open childcare facilities for families of medical providers to allay concern about the health and safety of their children.

Among other proactive policies and procedures, Germany maintains a network of reference centers and laboratories (across civilian and military sectors) to monitor for disease outbreaks. Its military laboratory can offer rapidly deployable modular field laboratories for safe identification and transport of suspected biological agents. Germany places an emphasis on collaboration with other countries and contributes to strengthening international plans.