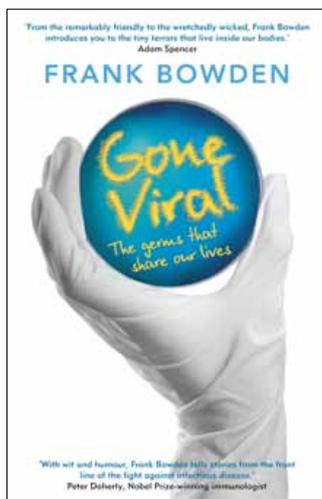


CAREFUL, THIS BOOK IS INFECTIOUS ...



Gone Viral: The Germs That Share Our Lives by Frank Bowden. New South Books, Sydney, 2011. RRP \$32.95.

Oh how can I forget you when there is always something there to remind me.

Lyrics by Burt Bacharach, 1928–

This quote, playfully opening the chapter on herpes viruses, ‘The pox under our noses’, demonstrates the humour with which our author approaches his subject. Frank Bowden, Canberra sexual health physician and infectious diseases specialist, has produced a witty yet informative book addressing many of the ‘germs which share our lives’. Part career memoir, the author draws on his considerable experience to navigate the non-medic through the mire of common infectious agents, debunking myths, informing and teaching as he goes. This book is an enjoyable and easy read, it is entertaining and at times downright hilarious. Each chapter is dedicated to a different microorganism, with 6 of 15 devoted to STIs: ‘a bias which I can further justify by observing that at least one in six readers of this book will acquire an STI in their lifetime ...’

Each chapter opens with a quote, from the mouths of greats such as Shakespeare to the likes of Kelly Osborne, and a brief CV of the microorganism featured. From here, the reader is skilfully captured via a combination of personal anecdotes and digestible

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historical notes to provide perspective to the coming epidemiology, pathology and occasional taxonomy, and the personal costs of infection. Frank Bowden manages to educate the lay reader, explaining the dynamic nature of infection epidemiology—marrying together rates and effects to social change and difference, both temporal and geographical—in simple and effective ways. Interspersed within this are interesting historical tidbits and stories—ever wondered about the horseshoe-shaped toilet seat or what the doctors of the 1950s meant by the acronym ‘COMI’? Read on!

Yes, Professor Bowden is an entertaining man. Yet he manages to convey the importance of public health messages and harm minimisation. The value of condom use and vaccination and the importance of herd immunity, as well as the significance of early needle exchange programs are clearly conveyed, and their benefit and impact discussed. Other subjects and difficult issues such as Indigenous health and social determinants of care are addressed and discussed with sensitivity and humility. This book features both wins and losses, successes and failures.

There is the wonderful success of the (almost) eradication of donovanosis in Australia, in which Frank Bowden played a key role. Little known, some may argue, this story should be compulsory reading for the medical student and clinician alike, as it encompasses many branches of the medical field including public health, sexual health, infectious diseases, rural medicine and general clinical care, to challenge the established process and procedure to eventual success. It is a clear example of how the dedicated work of individuals has spurred action and inspired others to create better health outcomes for marginalised populations and of what can be achieved with vision, collaboration and hard work. Moreover, the author does not shy away

from the current challenging issues, such as the disturbingly high rate of other STIs in the Indigenous populations. Here the author willingly presents his own opinions and alternative solutions, acknowledging that not all will agree.

Then there is the account of the emergence of HIV, recounted through the author’s experience as a young doctor in the mid 1980s. The history of the HIV riddle is chronicled from untreatable death sentence through the discovery of the first antiretroviral medications to quantification of risk today. Frank Bowden’s personal perspectives capture the fear and hopelessness of the time, in both public arena and medical ranks.

The view from the other end of the stethoscope will appeal to the non-medic. The clinical spectrum of infection is described, often in lurid (and alarming) terms, and at times the medical profession is represented in a poor, but honest, light. Woe betide the clinician who does not wash their hands (and according to Professor Bowden, that’s the majority of us). Readers have been put on their guard! Certainly the first chapter ‘Under the influence’ focusing on influenza (of course) and featuring the latest international s(t)ars, swine flu and bird flu, will interest many.

While aimed at the non-medic, *Gone Viral: The Germs That Share Our Lives* offers something for us all. I found myself interrupting my colleagues to share passages such as ‘the liver is your body’s big yellow taxi, because as Joni Mitchell says, you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til its gone ...’ and am waiting for an opportunity to reassure a patient that ‘the chance of you catching AIDS from a hepatitis B vaccine is about the same probability of you being kicked to death by a duck’.

With this book, Frank Bowden has not only proven himself a wonderful communicator, but also a skilled educator and visionary medical professional.

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