



Sex, Sin, and Science: A History of Syphilis in America (Healing Society: Disease, Medicine, and History)

By John Parascandola

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Social and cultural factors, as well as medical ones, help to shape the way we understand and react to diseases. In the case of a disease associated with sex, social and cultural factors figure especially large in its history. For example, moral and religious views influence almost everything connected with sex, and that includes sexually transmitted diseases. Syphilis thus provides an excellent case study to help understand the history of disease in a broader human context. This book covers the history of syphilis in America, from Colonial times to the present, as well as laying bare the origins and spread of the disease in Europe.

Several themes explored in the book illustrate ways in which non-medical factors influence our views of a disease and our reaction to it. One of these themes is the tendency to focus blame for the spread of a disease on a particular group (e.g., women, blacks, sinners). The balance between protecting the rights of individuals and protecting the public health, in issues such as whether to quarantine the infected and whether to require mandatory testing for the disease, is another theme. A third theme is the persistent reluctance of many Americans to discuss venereal disease openly because it involves sex, a subject that we are often not comfortable talking about.

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Review

"A wise adage directs readers not to judge a book by its cover. The same can be said for a title and an alluring dust jacket. . . . This is a book written by an eminent professional for the serious-minded. Recommended. Upper-level undergraduates through professionals/practitioners." - **Choice**

"Parascandola's history of syphilis is compelling from the beginning." - **CDC's "Emerging Infectious Diseases"**

"Parascandola provides a useful overview of the political and cultural factors that shaped the history of syphilis and the American public's response to it. His goal was to produce a history for the general reader, and this nicely written book, with its fascinating illustrations, should attract a wide audience." - **The Journal of American History**

"...interesting and informative account of multiple discourses regarding sexually transmitted diseases. . . . *Sex, Sin, and Syphilis* is compelling, interesting, and informative. It is both scholarly and accessible to the general reader. And it is timely, in light of a current rise in the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases." - **Bulletin of the History of Medicine**

"This book contains enough information -- both charming and thought-provoking -- to aerate any lecture. . . . Well worth the price of admission is Parascandola's discussion of the Tuskegee experiment. . . . That section provides one of the most powerful discussions I've read on exploring the context of medicine to extrapolate meaning. Likewise, Parascandola does an excellent job of exploring the problems of syphilis infection after the development of antibiotics." - **Journal of Social History**

About the Author

John Parascandola is a lecturer in the Department of History at the University of Maryland. He has served as Chief of the History of Medicine Division of the National Library of Medicine, after which he became the Public Health Service Historian, a position he held until his retirement in 2004. He is also the author of *The Development of American Pharmacology: John J. Abel and the Shaping of a Discipline* (1992).

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