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Book Review for The Lancet

The Seven Countries Study. A scientific adventure in cardiovascular disease epidemiology. Editors: D Kromhout, A Menotti, H Blackburn. Published by Brouwer Offset, Utrecht, The Netherlands. Price \$25.

This is the inside story of an epidemiological study which has become a living classic, told by those who planned and carried it out. As befits the tale of any scientific expedition into little known lands, it is full of personal reminiscences and professional detail and has all the excitement of Livingstone's "travels and researches". Most older epidemiologists have grown up with this study and waited eagerly for each new piece of the coronary heart disease jigsaw to be produced. The Seven Countries Study has been fundamental in providing a model for studying geographic differences in the frequency of chronic diseases and searching for their causes and most subsequent international and national prospective studies are based on it. It has also provided a model for thinking rationally about the origins and natural history of coronary heart disease and set a pattern for stating clear aims and objectives and for standardising methods.

Ansel Keys, to whom this book is dedicated on his 90th birthday, tells of its origins in the Laboratory of Physiological Hygiene in Minneapolis, and of his subsequent visits to countries with contrasting lifestyles, diets and blood cholesterol levels and varying reputed incidence of coronary heart disease. And so to the first formal examination of middle-aged men in Makarska, Croatia in 1958 until some 10,000 men from 14 cohorts in the seven countries had been screened. This was the first major epidemiological study to successfully extend cross-sectional studies to long-term follow-up, with remarkable success in the tracing of the participants over the past 30 years. If ever there was a strong argument for long-continued support for soundly based prospective studies in chronic disease, this is it!

Henry Blackburn, Key's successor in Minneapolis and who together with Geoffrey Rose developed the Minnesota coding system for electrocardiograms, gives his impressions from the field which include an earthquake in Japan, and he and Alessandro Menotti describe how the cohorts differing in diet and reputed incidence of CHD were chosen and how rigidly standardised methods and criteria and common protocols were implemented and coordinated. And so to the chapters on the several countries, from U.S railwaymen, to Finns both East and West, Dutchmen in Zutphen, Italians in Rome and rural areas, Greeks in Crete and Corfu, Croats and Serbs in what once was Yugoslavia and farmers in rural Japan. The scientists who did the work tell the story and each brief review carries the imprimatur of first-hand knowledge and personal commitment.

From the beginning, diet was considered to be an important if not fundamental determinant of CHD and the dietary surveys are described, although with disappointing brevity. The major results