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talin notoriously remarked
that one death was a tragedy,
while a million were a statistic. An
impressive feature of this book is
that, while recounting a great many
deaths, it maintains a human and
humane perspective. Dr. Ali S.
Khan is a former director of the
Office of Public Health Prepared-
ness and Response at the Centers
for Disease Control and Prevention
and has been close to the epicenter
of almost all the potential pandemic threats of the last few
decades. With William Patrick, an accomplished writer and
editor in his own right, Khan has produced an accessible,
fascinating book for the general reader that shares his expe-
riences in the service of his country and the world.

The book describes so many outbreaks that its ap-
proach is inevitably a little scattershot, but 2 subjects stand
out: the investigation of the anthrax mailings to Congress is
covered as well as I have seen anywhere, and the sections
dealing with the nightmare of Ebola in West Africa should
be required reading for anyone looking to improve our re-
sponse to infectious disease emergencies. As the authors
note, maintaining high standards of data hygiene is difficult
anywhere, but particularly so if we lack the will to priori-
tize public health even when resources are scarce.

Throughout, there is a subtle but steady bass line
of anguish over the difficulty of translating the science
we know into effective action. Khan argues that to keep
our priorities straight we need to recognize how the
unscrupulous, from black marketeers to politicians, ex-
plot outbreaks as opportunities for advancement; address-
ing that issue is an essential part of fighting the disease.
In the words of Albert Camus, “It is up to us not to join
forces with the pestilences.” We might not, but how can
we stop others from doing so? Khan suggests the creation
of a United Nations Undersecretary for Health Security,
which sounds sensible, but it is not clear what policies
that person might enact, and even less so how they would
be enforced.

It is the personal stories here that are the most affect-
ing, in the understanding that Khan extends to an Ebola-
infected nurse who denies that she knows how she acquired
the disease, or the prejudice faced by Khan himself as a
Muslim American in the years following 9/11. These dis-
eases infect humans, kill humans, and are battled by hu-
mans, with all the complicated consequences that entails.

There are a few missteps. The persistent nagging
use of clichés like “disease detectives” can sound pa-
tronizing. An assertion that viruses are “collectively in-
telligent” will surely raise eyebrows, and the title is a
little misleading, in that there is less focus than expected
on genuine catastrophic pandemic threats. However, as
another confessed “infectious disease nerd” I found it
fascinating. It will be enjoyed by working epidemiolo-
gists; it should be a point of reference for policymakers;
and I suspect it will inspire many future officers in the
Epidemic Intelligence Service.

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