

POLICY FORUM

Staying Just a Step Ahead

Introduction

Respiratory diseases are as timeless and ubiquitous as the air we breathe. Hippocrates knew of pneumonia in the 4th century and Maimonides described it in the 12th century, yet pneumonia still plagues us in the 21st century. Indeed, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, pneumonia, and influenza are still among the top 10 causes of death in the United States.

Science has helped us to move beyond signs and symptoms to treat the causes of these diseases. We know the bacteria, viruses, atypical bacteria, fungi, and parasites responsible for many of these illnesses are *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, influenza, *Mycoplasma pneumonia*, *Histoplasma capsulatum*, *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, and *Plasmodium malariae*. In addition to naming and understanding the causative organisms, we have also learned how to better detect these illnesses. Radiographs, examination of sputum, and culture of organisms initially did not change the dread (and death) associated with these illnesses. But eventually professional care, antibiotics, and respiratory support began to make a difference, although we still have a long way to go before the scourge of these diseases is eliminated.

This issue of the NCMJ considers a wide range of respiratory diseases, including both ancient nemeses and emerging diseases, all of which are constantly mutating and evolving to confuse the clinician and overwhelm the body. Thus, the authors in this issue describe the changes and evolution of both organisms and treatment. To cure these illnesses and improve patients' quality of life, the goal is always to stay just a step ahead. NCMJ

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