

## Book Reviews/Recensions

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### Recensions

#### *Health in Rural Canada*

Judith C. Kulig, Allison M. Williams  
Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2012.

#### **Book Review by Silvia Straka, Algoma University**

*Health in Rural Canada* is an interdisciplinary collection that brings together the most current health research on rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. As the first comprehensive volume of its kind, it provides a much-needed resource for policy researchers, educators, students, policy makers, and professionals concerned with rural Canadian health issues. There is a great deal of breadth in this book, which presents research across Canada (although some provinces/territories are under-represented). Similarly, the authors represent a wide range of disciplines. The 27 chapters are organized into seven sections (rural health status, rural health human resources, rural health services delivery, rural health policy and research, rural health issues, First Nations in rural settings, and aging in rural contexts).

This book is a valuable resource simply for having compiled all this current health research in one place. However, it also makes an important contribution by offering new lenses through which to understand the research as well as explore its meanings for rural communities. The book seeks to create a paradigm shift, moving away from the dominant medical model preoccupied with deficits and expert solutions. Instead, it focuses on the strengths and resiliencies of rural communities as a means of addressing the gaps, deficits and challenges of various rural areas. The authors clearly advocate for solutions to come from those living in rural communities – the people in the best position to define the problems and their solutions. Policy approaches should be grounded in community strengths and resiliencies, grassroots approaches, and the diverse identities of rural inhabitants.

These ideas are all contained within the theme of “health and place” (developed in Chapter 1) and its three sub-themes, which provide the book’s unifying framework. The first emphasizes the dynamic aspects of health and place, as many factors (i.e., social, economic, environmental, policy-related) affecting rural communities are continually creating change with potential health impacts. The second sub-theme highlights the uniqueness and heterogeneity of rural place. Diversity is considered with respect to gender, sexuality, different cultural groups, and socio-economic status, with a particular focus on Indigenous peoples and older adults. Finally, the third sub-theme looks at urban-rural differences. This urban-rural comparison is especially useful for readers more familiar with research on urban populations. Chapters 2 and 3 survey the rural health research and the rural-urban health gap respectively. Chapter 4 discusses variations in the provision and utilization of rural health services. Together, these chapters provide a comprehensive and current overview of Canadian research.

The second part of the book examines the difficulties of recruiting and retaining the rural health human resources needed for communities to work out their own health solutions. Chapter 5 calls for improved health human resource planning models to address important disparities in the geographic distribution of health professionals. Chapter 6 proposes an innovative, multi-sectorial model for a rural health training institute, drawing on interdisciplinary partnerships between education and practice settings. The following chapter then proposes continuing education as a means of recruitment, retention, and capacity building. Lastly, Chapter 8 suggests the benefits of a more community-based and holistic approach to mental health services rather than the individualistic medical model predominant in urban settings.

The next section, on rural health services delivery, emphasizes the theme of collaboration across sectors, disciplines, and jurisdictions. Chapter 9 discusses the essential role that such collaborations can have on improving access to services, while Chapter 10 addresses new technologies in rural health services. Chapter 11 highlights the dynamic nature of health and place by examining the restructuring of services in three Prairies communities in response to the many changes they were facing.

Rural health policy and research issues are at the centre of the following section. Chapter 12 provides a capacity development model for rural palliative care services, so people can die in their own communities. Chapter 13 looks at rural mental health issues and services, echoing some earlier themes: more community-based approaches, prevention and early intervention, and using technology to deliver services. Health literacy is the focus of the next chapter, followed by a discussion of the ethics of health research particular to rural contexts in Chapter 15, which foregrounds issues such as overlapping roles and relationships, anonymity, and confidentiality. The next part of the book describes some innovative approaches to identifying and responding to the needs of more specific rural subgroups. Chapter 16 addresses the challenges of HIV/AIDS information exchange in consideration of geographic distances. The following two chapters are on various aspects of palliative care provision, with Chapter 17 focusing on how to better support rural family caregivers, and Chapter 18 underlining the need for policy makers to consider the uniqueness of place in providing palliative care to seniors in Canada’s North. Looking again at the dynamic nature of rural health, Chapter 19 examines the impacts of BSE (i.e., “mad cow disease) on Alberta farm families.

The last two parts contain research on Indigenous people (Chapters 20-22) and aging in rural contexts (Chapters 23-25). Chapter 20 advocates for a decolonizing approach to First Nations health. Chapter 21 calls for a national Aboriginal health policy framework to address the present “policy patchwork” that results in important gaps in access and service provision. Métis health care access issues need to be situated in a distinct policy context, discussed in Chapter 22.

Chapters 23-25 address the changing policy needs of the older population, important since Northern and rural areas are more rapidly aging than the rest of Canada. Chapter 23 outlines four profiles of rural older adults, helping policy makers understand some of the diverse needs of this heterogeneous population group. Unique rural considerations for dementia care are discussed in Chapter 24. The issue of “resource frontier aging” in Chapter 25 considers the challenges of “aging in place” in communities that were not designed to support older people. This chapter is particularly concerned with “the burdensome scenario of caring for increasingly vulnerable rural people in increasingly vulnerable rural places” (pp.477-478). Chapter 26 addresses rural women’s health issues, and Chapter 27 concludes with some thoughts on future directions of rural health research.

This book will appeal to a wide range of policy readers interested rural health issues. Certain survey chapters are particularly appropriate for undergraduate students being introduced to such issues across a range of disciplines. Each chapter begins with a summary of main points, especially suitable for the needs of students. At the same time, the content is advanced and comprehensive enough for this book to become a key reference in the libraries of health and social policy researchers.

*Health in Rural Canada* has become an invaluable addition to my sparse library on rural and northern issues. Until this book, there were few resources that provided an overview of the Northern/rural context. Although I began reading it with some trepidation, expecting it to be situated in the dominant deficits approach to health, I was surprised and delighted by the end of the first chapter, whose frameworks have since infused my teaching on aging. This book has helped me make sense of my Northern and rural context that goes beyond the health issues only, as it addresses the interconnections between health status, the social determinants of health, the education and retention of health professionals, and the structures and challenges of services delivery in rural areas.

Overall, this book provides an excellent foundation for thinking about rural health and social policy from an interdisciplinary perspective. Although there is little content specific to the different disciplines, this is not a weakness, but rather a strength, because it makes the book relevant to a wide range of readers. At the same time, this generalized focus suggests that there is a need for more discipline-specific books that build further on the knowledge-base presented here through a variety of other lenses. *Health in Rural Canada* is a much-welcomed addition to the Canadian literature, providing a foundation for education as well as the development of new policy approaches and new research directions.