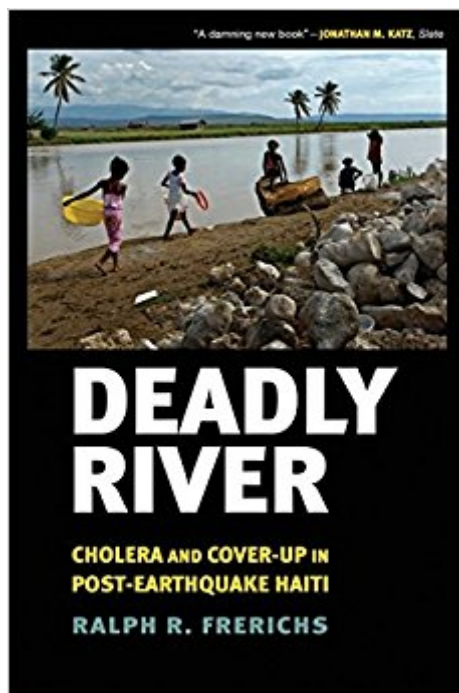




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# Deadly River: Cholera And Cover-Up In Post-Earthquake Haiti (The Culture And Politics Of Health Care Work)



## Synopsis

In October 2010, nine months after the massive earthquake that devastated Haiti, a second disaster began to unfold—soon to become the world's largest cholera epidemic in modern times. In a country that had never before reported cholera, the epidemic mysteriously and simultaneously appeared in river communities of central Haiti, eventually triggering nearly 800,000 cases and 9,000 deaths. What had caused the first cases of cholera in Haiti in recorded history? Who or what was the deadly agent of origin? Why did it explode in the agricultural-rich delta of the Artibonite River? When answers were few, rumors spread, causing social and political consequences of their own. Wanting insight, the Haitian government and French embassy requested epidemiological assistance from France. A few weeks into the epidemic, physician and infectious disease specialist Renaud Piarroux arrived in Haiti. In *Deadly River*, Ralph R. Frerichs tells the story of the epidemic—of a French disease detective determined to trace its origins so that he could help contain the spread and possibly eliminate the disease—and the political intrigue that has made that effort so difficult. The story involves political maneuvering by powerful organizations such as the United Nations and its peacekeeping troops in Haiti, as well as by the World Health Organization and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. Frerichs explores a quest for scientific truth and dissects a scientific disagreement involving world-renowned cholera experts who find themselves embroiled in intellectual and political turmoil in a poverty-stricken country. Frerichs's narrative highlights how the world's wealthy nations, nongovernmental agencies, and international institutions respond when their interests clash with the needs of the world's most vulnerable people. The story poses big social questions and offers insights not only on how to eliminate cholera in Haiti but also how nations, NGOs, and international organizations such as the UN and CDC deal with catastrophic infectious disease epidemics.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"All public health students should read this book for two reasons: first, for the in-depth story of the scientific investigation of the source of the epidemic; and second, for the story of the political resistance and barriers, both powerful and subtle, that Piarroux encountered. . . . The description of Piarroux's investigation is fascinating." — Laura Price, International Quarterly of Community Health Education (September 2016) "The CDC discouraged journalists from asking about the epidemic's origin, telling them that pinpointing the source was 'not productive,' and would likely never happen. Its epidemiologists did provide a key detail early on, when they identified the strain in Haiti as having a recent South Asian origin meaning it could have come from Nepal and not from South America, Africa, or anywhere else cholera was circulating at the time. The CDC refused to take environmental samples from around the [UN Peacekeepers] base or test the soldiers during the small window when doing either would have been worthwhile. All of this detailed in a damning new book by Ralph R. Frerichs called *Deadly River*." — Jonathan M. Katz, "The Killer Hiding in the CDC Map," Slate "Deadly River tells two fascinating stories. One is about epidemiological and molecular biology detective work. This work justified the growing certainty that defective United Nations procedures had allowed Nepalese peacekeepers to start a devastating cholera epidemic in Haiti. The second story is about how the UN, the WHO, elements of the Haitian government, and the CDC did their best to prevent these facts from coming to light. They told themselves that they did this to serve what they thought was the greater public good. They pushed forward scientists with an academic ax to grind who had theories congenial to their agenda. We are used to industrial interests 'manufacturing doubt' about inconvenient truths. This second story shows that governments do it as well." — Dr. Raymond Richard Neutra, retired chief of the Division of Environmental and Occupational Disease Control, California Department of Public Health "Deadly River tells the story of how the lethal disease cholera found its way from the high valleys of the Himalayas to the tropical landscapes of Haiti, months after the devastating 2010 Port-au-Prince earthquake. This knowledge didn't come easy but was acquired through the dogged

efforts of many investigators (a dedicated French epidemiologist, international infectious disease experts, molecular biologists, and journalists) all of whom were focused on finding the truth rather than accepting speculation or unproven theories. Ralph R. Frerichs's book is a fascinating read that also provides many insights into the strengths and weaknesses of human nature—curiosity, skepticism, stubbornness, ignorance, pride, denial, deception—all framed by a tragic event that has changed the lives of millions of impoverished people."—John J. Mekalanos, Harvard Medical School

"It is beyond the scope of the present report to recount the analyses and conclusions of the various studies, but this task has been undertaken systematically in [Deadly River]. Its author, Ralph R. Frerichs, is Professor Emeritus of Epidemiology at UCLA and the book provides a painstaking and even-handed assessment of the scientific debates that have taken place. For present purposes, it must suffice to note that the book concludes that the peacekeepers were responsible for bringing cholera. In doing so, it systematically vindicates the conclusions reached by one of the first international experts on cholera to investigate the outbreak in Haiti, Dr. Renaud Piarroux. It also deplores what it describes as a 'misinformation campaign to protect the UN and the peacekeeping program.'"—Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur for Extreme Poverty and Human Rights and Professor of International Law, New York University, Report to the United Nations General Assembly (A/71/367, August 26, 2016)

Ralph R. Frerichs is Professor Emeritus of Epidemiology at UCLA.

While enthralled with Ralph R. Frerichs' book, *Deadly River: Cholera and Cover-up in Post-Earthquake Haiti*, I could not help but think of my own experience in public health which began 50+ years ago. My one course in epidemiology was the most exciting and interesting during my graduate public health education. Especially great were the presentations of case studies on a disease outbreak and a dynamic interaction with the professor about what questions and further information might help students determine the source and causal pathways. As exciting as that educational approach was, it was nowhere as completely captivating as the detailed case study of cholera in Haiti presented by Frerichs. While leading me through the evidence on the source, the author reviewed many of the major principles of epidemiology in a most convincing manner and argued that a true understanding of the source was essential to the task of ridding Haiti from the scourge. At the same time, he reminded me how the "great love affair" of my youth ' with the international health agencies for whom I hoped to work ' as in most early love experiences, required the suspension of critical thinking towards the love object. Frerichs provided all of the information

necessary for the reader to make a critical appraisal of these same agencies who let politics and self interest guide their actions instead of epidemiological principles. But rather than give up completely on the idealism of my youth, I prefer to conclude that this case study provides insight into the "perfect storm" of factors preventing major agencies from fulfilling their responsibilities -- a lesson in how bad they can behave when they are responsible for the outbreak and wish to obfuscate the facts. Hopefully, these factors will not often repeat themselves, but the book reminds us to remain vigilant.

Deadly River is a cautionary tale, a science detective story and a great read. Mr. Frerichs has taken straightforward, methodically discovered observations about the origin and spread of the recent Haitian cholera epidemic, with strategic implications for its cure, and used them convincingly against competing theories offered by agencies and individuals who have much to lose from these inconvenient conclusions. The story's protagonists are scientists and French epidemiologist Renaud Piarroux in particular and investigative journalists, and also health care workers, bureaucrats, diplomats and politicians. Glory and the blame are liberally spread around but, all in all, the humanity is deep. We sympathize with the Haitian and Nepalese victims. But are also required to empathize with the worst offenders, those with only human reasons for carrying the deadly bacterium, dumping toxic waste, trying to quash political discontent or protecting diplomatic and scientific reputations. There is plenty of self-service and cowardice to disdain, but nothing is that simple in this gripping tale of misinformation and denial being hounded by facts, horrible decisions met by persistent exposure and massive suffering calling out selfless sacrifice. The fact that the epidemic and the intrigue are all real, and current, helps make this book profoundly poignant.

This comprehensive review of the means by which the Haiti cholera epidemic, which began in 2010, was tracked to the UN Nepali mission is a first-class description of how to investigate epidemic outbreaks in non-developed areas. It is also a political story in which officials seeking to advance an "environmental" theory of the outbreak, favouring the UN, refused to accept the hard evidence revealed in the field. For students in epidemiology, public health, and political relations it's a very valuable story. For those interested in disease mapping as a means of investigating epidemics (See my Cartographies of Disease, and separately, my Disease Maps) the mapping is a hero, a critical tool in the investigation. For those people, the lack of good quality maps is unfortunate. But in general, this book well serves those interested in the Haitian outbreak, public health in the

international sphere, and the spread of epidemic diseases (Chickengunya, Dengue, Zika, etc.) in general.

Deadly River was an outstanding book, carefully detailing the research and work that Piarroux and his associates did in debunking environmental origin theories of cholera in Haiti (which strangely echoes the miasma theories of the Victorian era). My research interest is more in spatial/temporal analysis of epidemiology, and this book did not disappoint, including several maps by Piarroux and associates as well as those used by CDC, UN, and other researchers. Extensive and comprehensive references and bibliography pointed me to follow up outside of the book and has made it easier to follow the trail that authors led in their investigation. The book flows well with good pacing and strikes a good balance towards being accessible (I would use this in a relevant course) and being rigorous (This is not a thriller like "hot zone" or similar).

Clearly describes the role that the United States played in defending the United Nations and excusing its complicity introducing cholera into Haiti, which hadn't had a case in over 200 years. The UN's cholera led to the death of nearly 10,000 people and the illness of hundreds of thousands. Made me mad when I read it but it explained the situation carefully and clearly, depicting not only the science of the situation but also the politics.

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