



## Book Review: Prevention Diaries

Prevention Diaries. *Larry Cohen*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 249+xv, £16.99, ISBN 9780190623821

Larry Cohen is the Founder and Executive Director of the Prevention Institute, a not-for-profit organization that promotes primary prevention of health problems and health equity. According to its website [<https://www.preventioninstitute.org>], its main concerns are health systems transformation, preventing violence, healthy food and active environments, promoting mental health and well-being, reducing unintentional injury, and early childhood. Judging from its number of staff and the profile of its philanthropic and government funders, the organization is a force to be reckoned with. I mention all this in case some readers, like me I'm somewhat embarrassed to say, were previously unaware of the Institute, and because it is central to the story Cohen has to tell.

*Prevention Diaries* is part memoir, part history of the Prevention Institute, part political statement aimed at changing the emphasis on care of the ill to an emphasis on health, and part primer in prevention. Because Cohen writes so clearly and simply, he manages to weave these somewhat disparate strands into a coherent, engaging and informative story.

Cohen's rhetorical style is to relate a short story about his own (and sometimes others') experiences (often traumatic in his case) and to use this as a springboard to discuss ways of preventing illness and accidents. This allows him to cover many areas that he and the Prevention Institute have been involved with over the years, such as tobacco control, road safety, urban design, food and drink, unintentional injuries, gun control, housing, education, lead, poverty and the health system. There is a chapter on fairness and equity, but these qualities and an awareness of the social determinants of health pervade the whole book.

The overall approach of the Prevention Institute is well described, largely through vignettes and just three

diagrammatic frameworks. Cohen and his colleagues clearly have a very comprehensive and sophisticated understanding of society and social change. Consequently, they use a wide range of prevention techniques—from lobbying for legislative and policy change, through partnerships with businesses and grassroots organizations (Cohen seems to know everybody), to community education, mobilisation and activism—but always emphasizing 'upstream' prevention and maximizing the benefits for the most needy.

Cohen's stated purpose in writing *Prevention Diaries* is to deliver the prevention message 'more broadly'. To whom, he does not specify. To my mind, public health is an interventionist discipline. Our purpose is to improve health, well-being and equity, and we achieve this by creating physical and social environments in which people can live healthy lives and make healthy choices. In sum, we seek to change both society and individuals. Epidemiologists contribute to the knowledge base that informs public health actions. Few, however, work across a broad range of public health domains and not all are involved in the practical application of their work—the intervention aspect. For any epidemiologist who wants a taste of how prevention is currently being applied across a wide range of public health areas, *Prevention Diaries* offers a *degustation* menu. The Prevention Institute's work is impressive in its approaches, methods and achievements, and Cohen's description of it is engaging and comprehensive.

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