‘Publishers have created lists of short books that discuss the questions that your average [electoral] candidate will only ever touch if armed with a slogan and a soundbite. Together [such books] hint at a resurgence of the grand educational tradition... Closest to the hot headline issues are The No-Nonsense Guides. These target those topics that a large army of voters care about, but that politicos evade. Arguments, figures and documents combine to prove that good journalism is far too important to be left to (most) journalists.’

Boyd Tonkin,
The Independent,
London
About the author
Shereen Usdin is a South African medical doctor with a Masters in Public Health from Harvard University. She was a 2004 Shoprite-Checkers/SABC Woman of the Year and named one of the Gordon Institute of Business Science’s 2006 Social Entrepreneurs of the Year. She is a Senior Executive at the Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication and sits on South Africa’s Presidential Working Group on Women. She writes in her personal capacity.

Acknowledgements
Jonathan Berger, Professor Sharon Fonn, Professor Rachel Jewkes, Priya Naidu, Associate Professor Rafael Obregon, Mohau Pheko, Lebo Ramafoke, Professor David Sanders, Sarah Sexton, Scott Sinclair, Karen, Martine, Renee and Ros Usdin, Haroon Wadde and Troth Wells for their precious time and good advice. And my daughter Romy for her precious presence.

Other titles in the series
The No-Nonsense Guide to Animal Rights
The No-Nonsense Guide to Climate Change
The No-Nonsense Guide to Conflict and Peace
The No-Nonsense Guide to Fair Trade
The No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization
The No-Nonsense Guide to Human Rights
The No-Nonsense Guide to International Development
The No-Nonsense Guide to Islam
The No-Nonsense Guide to Science
The No-Nonsense Guide to Sexual Diversity
The No-Nonsense Guide to Tourism
The No-Nonsense Guide to World History
The No-Nonsense Guide to World Poverty

About the New Internationalist
The New Internationalist is an independent not-for-profit publishing co-operative. Our mission is to report on issues of global justice. We publish informative current affairs and popular reference titles, complemented by world food, photography and gift books as well as calendars, diaries, maps and posters – all with a global justice world view.

If you like this No-Nonsense Guide you'll also love the New Internationalist magazine. Each month it takes a different subject such as Trade Justice, Nuclear Power or Iraq, exploring and explaining the issues in a concise way; the magazine is full of photos, charts and graphs as well as music, film and book reviews, country profiles, interviews and news.

To find out more about the New Internationalist, visit our website at www.newint.org
The NO-NONSENSE GUIDE to WORLD HEALTH

Shereen Usdin
Foreword

AT THE DAWN of the 21st century we have the wherewithal, more than ever before, to secure a life of health and wellbeing for each and every citizen of this earth. And yet millions of people still die every day from preventable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, TB, diarrhea, malaria and measles. The list is long.

Over the last 5 years, more than 40 million Africans alone died deaths that could have been averted if we were only committed to doing so. This number surpasses the total deaths from all modern African and global conflicts including the two world wars. It is roughly the equivalent of the combined population of Africa’s 10 least populous countries. The total number of deaths worldwide that result from preventable diseases is almost beyond our capacity to imagine.

How is it possible that in a world with unparalleled wealth, so many people die of diseases that have their roots in grueling, demeaning, dehumanizing poverty?

Poverty has many causes but the current inequities are in large part due to a globalizing economy that is gathering wealth at the expense of the poor. Trade has the potential to lift millions of poor people around the world out of poverty but currently it is doing the opposite. Unfair trade rules are allowing the rich to get richer, while the poor are getting poorer. Today, more than half the population of Africa lives on less than a dollar a day.

The citizens of many countries that have thrown off the shackles of colonialism had great hopes for freedom. But freedom is nothing if it does not translate into electricity; clean water; a safe place to live; a job that pays a living wage; schools for one’s children and access to health care.

At the moment wealthy nations spend billions on weapons when a fraction of the world’s military budgets would eradicate poverty and provide basic
needs from food to clean water for everyone. If the wealthy nations were really committed to improving the lives of the poorer nations we could end poverty and in doing so reduce the tragic death toll from poverty-related diseases.

The fact that so many people are poor and live in an unequal world creates a crisis that affects us all. Poverty not only gives rise to diseases that can spread around the globe, it also jeopardizes national economies and endangers social and political security. As humans, we are bound together and ultimately we will sink or swim together.

My dream is that one day my children will wake up and realize that they are members of one global family. A family that cares for one another.

It is my hope that every child has a decent chance of survival, that every child can have access to an adequate education and health care. The spin-off for individual countries and ultimately for the entire world would be tremendous.

We must do something because it is the logic of being human. We cannot be human on our own: we can be human only together.

Shereen Usdin’s *No-Nonsense Guide to World Health* is premised on this belief – that without social justice, a life of health and dignity for all the world’s people cannot be fully realized.

*Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu*  
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate
CONTENTS

Foreword by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu .... 5

Introduction ............................................. 8

1 No ‘Health for All’ by the 21st century .......... 10

2 Globalization: the slings and arrows
    of outrageous fortune ............................. 31

3 The politics of patents ............................. 51

4 The politics of gender .............................. 70

5 The emergence of old and new epidemics ....... 89

6 Non-communicable ‘pandemics’:
    the high price of Big Business ................. 109

7 The big fix ........................................... 126

Resources and contacts ............................. 150

Index .................................................. 152
Introduction

IN 1981, AS a young medical student at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, I attended a conference called ‘Apartheid and Health: History of the Main Complaint’. It joined many dots for me at a time in South Africa when there was little that made sense.

All good doctors begin examinations by asking about ‘the history of the main complaint’. This precedes the physical examination and is designed to get to the bottom of the problem. ‘Where is the pain, when did it start, what makes it worse, what makes it better?’ And so on. A diagnosis follows and treatment is prescribed.

The ‘Apartheid and Health’ conference challenged us to go beyond this history and ask questions that would get to the root cause of disease and death under apartheid.

This questioning would reveal the history of a man whose main complaint was a lingering cough with night sweats and chest pain. The disease was TB but the root cause was his life as a miner exposed to the bacillus while extracting the gold South Africa is famous for. Denied the vote under apartheid, black South Africans were made citizens of arid homelands in far-flung areas. A pool of labor for White South Africa, but unable to live there permanently, people became migrants in their own country. Living in squalid, overcrowded single-sex hostels, lack of decent food and poor working conditions made the miner an easy target for infection.

This interpretation of the history of the main complaint has resonated with many others. My work as a doctor only served to solidify the diagnosis that ill health is inextricably linked to poverty and inequity for which social justice is the cure.

This book was written in the heat of a Johannesburg summer with mosquitoes buzzing around my sleeping
child. I imagined what it would be like to be a parent in an endemic malaria area. It would be hard to have a good night’s sleep. And yet, despite a million children dying every year from malaria, the world sleeps.

This book examines what we are sleeping through. It looks at the political economy of health in today’s world. It hopes to answer why in this day and age, where there is so much wealth, there is also so much suffering.

Every attempt has been made to reflect the terrain accurately but new developments on the global health landscape have arisen even in the course of writing this book. The G8 group of richest countries is soon to meet again and new commitments will be made. Or maybe not.

It is an enormous field to traverse and there is not enough space in this book to do it full justice. Many important health-related areas are missing – war and other complex humanitarian emergencies, disability, youth, education, and much else. Some issues, reduced to paragraphs here, are the subject of tomes. The scope of the problem is disheartening on many levels.

But at the same time there is cause for optimism. Not so long ago, books suggesting ‘another world is possible’ were relegated to shelves alongside dusty copies of Das Kapital. Nowadays this view is increasingly mainstream. People are seeing the impact of the current world order all around them. With this has come an acknowledgement that the treatment for the main complaint is a commitment to social justice and the universality of human rights.

Shereen Usdin
Johannesburg, South Africa