

Secret Agents



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So you think modern medicine has the whole virus game figured out? Think again. And it's not even a question of "if" we'll be hit by some new and deadly disease--it's "when." The war on germs is being fought on many fronts--from the skirmishes with disease-carrying mosquitoes that cross oceans hidden away in airline wheel wells to the high-profile battle against terrorists wielding deadly bioweapons. Today's bold headlines would have us believe that the biggest threat comes from bioterrorism. But don't underestimate Mother Nature, perhaps the most savage bioterrorist of all. Assisted by the increasing ease with which people--and the germs they carry--move across international borders, she's an effective force to be reckoned with, a key player on this battlefield. As author Madeline Drexler makes clear, we'd do best not to ignore her. Human beings and the pathogens that attack them are crossing paths more and more frequently, particularly as modern life grows increasingly complex. Whatever the infectious agent may be, whether it's pandemic flu, foodborne illness, a debilitating disease carried far and wide by biting insects, or some new microbial horror we have yet to detect, keen surveillance and rapid response are really the only weapons in our arsenal. *Secret Agents* looks at today's new and emerging infections--those that have increased in attack rate or geographic range, or threaten to do so--and tells the stories of scientists racing to catch up with invisible adversaries superior in both speed and guile. Each chapter focuses on a different threat: foodborne pathogens, antibiotic resistance, animals and insectborne diseases, pandemic influenza, infectious causes of chronic disease, and bioterrorism, including the latest information on the public health threats posed by anthrax and diseases such as smallpox. Based in part on material collected from the Forum on Emerging Infections hosted by the Institute of Medicine in Washington, D.C., *Secret Agents* is ultimately as engaging as it is disturbing. Drexler's thorough survey of the field of infectious disease, supplemented by extensive interviews with today's top researchers, yields a compelling portrait of a world engaged in a clandestine war. Emerging infections are among the many secret ties that bind the world into an organic whole. We know that infectious disease is an inescapable part of life, but we need to begin thinking globally and acting locally if we are to avoid the menace of a catastrophic outbreak of some new plague. *Secret Agents* sounds a clear and compelling call to take up arms against the organic predators among us.

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