

# Foreword

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If someone decided to compile a list of horrible and deadly occupational diseases, silicosis would surely lead it. Silicosis involves the chronic and massive destruction of the lungs and is caused by the long-term inhalation of silica (finely ground sand) dust. It initially causes terrible shortness of breath and ultimately slow suffocation and death. A malady that afflicted those working in mines, smelters, foundries, and other industrial settings during the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, silicosis was a poorly understood disease that rose to prominence in the 1930s and virtually vanished from the public and medical eye after World War II.

In 1991 David Rosner and Gerald Markowitz brought the fascinating and disturbing history of silicosis in America to light, demonstrating how a devastating disease can be forgotten despite its affecting hundreds of thousands of American workers. When *Deadly Dust* was first published, the book quickly became a model of historical scholarship as it forged into the relatively uncharted terrain of the history of occupational and environmental health. While historians of medicine and public health have long documented many aspects of the human experience of illness using the critical lenses of culture, social order, class, gender, ideology, policy, and technology, occupational and environmental health have received much less attention. *Deadly Dust* expanded the purview of the history of medicine, exploring in meticulous detail and analyzing with great insight how dangerous chemicals and hazardous conditions had endangered, incapacitated, and led to the deaths of America's workingmen and -women.

The impact of *Deadly Dust* reached far beyond library shelves and history seminar rooms, however. The information it contained was widely circulated in legal arenas and courtrooms as lawsuits about industrial and environmental health were heard across the country during the 1990s. This reflected the book's relevance to ongoing and largely preventable health hazards in the industrial workplace as well as the authors' ability to convey complex and potentially dry and technical material in a lively and human fashion. The authors' presentation of the personal stories of workers whose lives were irrevocably damaged by the sequelae of silicosis is engaging storytelling written in the finest style of social history.

We are fortunate that David Rosner and Gerald Markowitz have been consistently on the vanguard of this critical chapter in the history of medicine and health. From their pathbreaking scholarship on silicosis to more recent

forays documenting the role that lead and other industrial toxins have played in American society, Rosner and Markowitz have done so much more than merely advance their scholarly fields; indeed, their work has helped to significantly advance both knowledge and health.

Given that we live in a time when workers continue to be exposed to dangerous toxins and health care protections are often in jeopardy, the book's lessons are more cogent and as vital as they were fifteen years ago. This book exemplifies how a nuanced understanding of an era's social, political, economic, and intellectual markers can productively help to shape our responses to particular health problems.

In this new and expanded edition of this classic work of public health history, Rosner and Markowitz have added a new preface, a closing chapter, and an informative appendix that expand on the story of silicosis; the worker; and, more broadly, occupational health in the decade and a half since the book's original publication. Most striking is the return of silicosis to popular and professional consciousness, in part because of the publication of *Deadly Dust*, as witnessed in the medical literature; in tort litigation; and, in some instances, in an increasing commitment on the part of industry to address this dire health problem.

Rosner and Markowitz are not only intrepid and creative researchers who consistently manage to find new and critical documentary evidence about the history of occupational and environmental health; they are engaged scholars in the finest tradition of that by now overused label. Always in a state of action, progress, or motion, these two historians, more than anyone in the field, have dedicated their scholarly prowess and brilliant command of the historical literature to demonstrating our contemporary responsibilities toward ensuring a healthy and safe workplace for all workers—blue collar and white collar, executive and laborer, miner and clerk.

We are delighted to present this newly updated and revised edition of this critically important book, a volume in the series *Conversations in Medicine and Society* published by the University of Michigan Press. Rosner and Markowitz poignantly demonstrate that far more than mere conversation is necessary when fighting for the health needs and rights of workers and combating the evils of wholly preventable occupational diseases. And that something more is action.