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In the early twentieth century, over 100,000 poor Southerners, young and old, black and white, sharecroppers and mill hands, were afflicted annually with pellagra, a mysterious and frequently fatal disease characterized by skin lesions, delirium, and gastrointestinal disturbances (1). Each flood of the Mississippi River or collapse in the price of cotton pushed up the incidence. As fatalities rose, Joseph Goldberger, an up-and-coming bacteriologist in the US Public Health Service, assigned in 1914 to investigate the growing epidemic, concluded that the widely accepted infectious etiology was incorrect. Through careful field work in prisons and orphanages, Goldberger provided strong evidence for an underlying dietary deficiency (1–7). To convince the scientific public that pellagra was not transmissible, Goldberger, his coworkers, and his wife received injections of blood and excrement from affected prisoners. That none of them came down with pellagra is part of the saga, but that they escaped hepatitis or syphilis or some other common disease was indeed fortuitous.

Because pellagra's victims were poor and socially unconnected, Goldberger's original cure, a diet rich in lean meat, eggs, and milk, was considered unacceptable because it was too expensive. Returning to the federal government’s Hygienic Laboratory in Washington, Goldberger validated a model of the disease in dogs and showed that brewer's yeast, too expensive. Returning to the federal government post. Turned down by the Navy, he accepted a commission in the US Marine Hospital Service, which became the US Public Health Service in 1912. This book also recalls the multiple subtle and overt instances of anti-Semitism that Goldberger endured, including the extreme prejudice practiced by the US Navy in the recruitment of officers. We are all indebted to the Navy for rejecting Goldberger and thus assuring his scientific and medical legacy.

Instead of a history of a plague, Kraut presents a role model. Because of that, I recommend this book to every health care professional in his or her formative years. Curriculum committees often overvalue facts and neglect role models. It would be easy to remove 313 pages from today's overstuffed medical curriculums and substitute this narrative of Goldberger's life.


