



Black Lung: Anatomy of a Public Health Disaster

Alan Derickson

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In the definitive history of a twentieth-century public health disaster, Alan Derickson recounts how, for decades after methods of prevention were known, hundreds of thousands of American miners suffered and died from black lung, a respiratory illness caused by the inhalation of coal mine dust. The combined failure of government, medicine, and industry to halt the spread of this disease--and even to acknowledge its existence--resulted in a national tragedy, the effects of which are still being felt.

The book begins in the late nineteenth century, when the disorders brought on by exposure to coal mine dust were first identified as components of a debilitating and distinctive illness. For several decades thereafter, coal miners' dust disease was accepted, in both lay and professional circles, as a major industrial disease. Derickson describes how after the turn of the century medical professionals and industry representatives worked to discredit and supplant knowledge about black lung, with such success that this disease ceased to be recognized. Many authorities maintained that breathing coal mine dust was actually beneficial to health.

Derickson shows that activists ultimately forced society to overcome its complacency about this deadly and preventable disease. He chronicles the growth of an unprecedented movement--from the turn-of-the-century miners' union, to the social medicine activists in the mid-twentieth century, and the black lung insurgents of the late sixties--which eventually won landmark protections and compensation with the enactment of the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act in 1969.

An extraordinary work of scholarship, *Black Lung* exposes the enormous human cost of producing the energy source responsible for making the United States the world's preeminent industrial nation.

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