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MEDICAL GEOGRAPHY AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE
AETIOLOGY OF RARE SYSTEMIC CONNECTIVE TISSUE
DISEASES

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in
Geography at Massey University

BY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is in two interrelated parts. Part One traced the historical development of medical geography since the idea of applying a geographical perspective to medical problems was first mooted in 4 B.C. The main trends in the evolving philosophy and methodology of this field were noted, and a distinction was made between the Western and Soviet interpretations of the nature and scope of medical geography. The methods available to medical geographers for cartographically portraying medical data were discussed.

Part Two represented the application of geographical principles to the study of rare systemic connective tissue diseases. The inherent problems of collection, and of verification of the medical data used in this study were detailed. Using cartographic and statistical techniques the diseases under study were spatially and temporally defined. It was found that scleroderma had a statistically significantly high incidence in the Taieri Geographic County, and it was this disease and this area which were the principal contributory factors to the statistically significantly high incidence of all connective tissue diseases at the larger scales of areal units in the Otago region.

The structures of the populations affected by these diseases were also studied, with the findings generally confirming the results obtained in overseas surveys. No association was found between the incidence of systemic lupus erythematosus, and high

sunshine hours, while the disease subsets did not exhibit a rural or urban bias in their incidence. Paucity of cases precluded a study of the possible racial predilection of the diseases or any association of incidence with a patient's occupation.

Suggested avenues for possible aetiological research accruing from this analysis were detailed.

PREFACE

Despite the long ancestry of medical geography, the field has only recently shown signs of emerging as a distinct speciality (Armstrong, 1965a). The application of geographic techniques to medical problems is frequently viewed with suspicion and scepticism not only by those in medicine, but also by many fellow geographers. This thesis attempts to demonstrate the utility of such an approach to medical research.

Although in two parts, this work should be regarded as a sequential statement on an integrated project. Part One 'The Field of Medical Geography' introduces the concepts of 'health' and 'disease', while also discussing the 'position' of medical geography on the borderline between the two parent disciplines, medicine and geography. The historical development of medical geography is examined in Chapter Two, with a differentiation being made between the respective Western and Soviet interpretations of the nature and scope of the field. While cartography has evolved to become an integral part of contemporary medical geographic research, this situation has not always prevailed. Chapter Three considers the development of medical cartography, and concludes with a discussion and evaluation of the methods available to a medical geographer for portraying health and ill-health data.

Part Two applies a medical geographic methodology to the study of rare connective tissue diseases within the New Zealand environment. The aim of this survey was to provide a perspective

on the natural history of the diseases under study, to suggest clues for further investigative research, to test whether the findings of overseas studies are confirmed by New Zealand data, and to provide an illustrative case study in medical geography. As the quality and quantity of the data available determines the extent of a medical geographic study, and the sophistication of the techniques that can be utilised, the data base is extensively discussed in Chapter Two. Cartographic and statistical techniques were employed to test a number of formulated hypotheses aimed at spatially and temporally defining the diseases. Comparison is also made with overseas studies as to the structure of the populations found to be affected by these diseases.

As medical geography is a tool for research and rarely an end in itself (McGlashan, 1972b), this study must be regarded as only a foundation stage of research into the aetiology of connective tissue diseases. Therefore, the conclusions that accrue from this study are offered as tentative hypotheses for subsequent testing.

This thesis provides evidence of the important contribution that geographers have made to medical research. Due to the multiple aetiology of most diseases, prevention or control can only be achieved through inter-disciplinary co-operation. Medical geographers, with their macroscopic perspective of the environment, and their specific geographical competences, should be considered as integral members of future medical research teams.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page No.</u>
Abstract	(i)
Preface	(iii)
Acknowledgements	(v)
List of Tables and Figures	(vii)

PART ONE

THE FIELD OF MEDICAL GEOGRAPHY

CHAPTER ONE

HEALTH AND DISEASE	1
<u>The Role of Geography in Medical Research</u>	3

CHAPTER TWO

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF MEDICAL GEOGRAPHY	9
<u>A History of Western Medical Geography</u>	9
Classical Medical Geography	10
Medical Geography in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries	12
Medical Geography in the Eighteenth Century	14
Medical Geography in the Nineteenth Century	15
Medical Geography in the Later Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries	17
Medical Geography Since 1945	20
Medical Geography in the Contemporary Era	24
<u>The Evolution of Medical Geography in the U.S.S.R.</u>	26
The Late Nineteenth Century	27
The Advent of Soviet Medical Geography	28
The Emerged Speciality: Soviet Medical Geography Since 1945	29
<u>Centuries in Theory, Decades in Practice!</u>	34

CHAPTER THREE

CARTOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS AS A RESEARCH TOOL IN MEDICAL GEOGRAPHY	37
<u>The Genesis of Medical Mapping</u>	38
<u>Cholera Cartography</u>	41
<u>Attempts at Global Disease Mapping</u>	48
<u>The Later Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries</u> ..	49
<u>Disease Cartography in the Contemporary Era</u>	54
World Atlases	54
Developed Countries	58
Underdeveloped Countries	65
<u>Disease Maps by Computer</u>	70
<u>Methodological Considerations in the Display of Health or Ill-Health Data</u>	71
Dot Mapping	72
Rate Mapping	73
Isolines	77
Probability Mapping	82
Graphs and Diagrams	85
Medical Geographic Models	86

PART TWO

THE MEDICAL GEOGRAPHY OF CONNECTIVE TISSUE DISEASES

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION	89
<u>The Rationale for a Medical Geographic Study of Connective Tissue Diseases</u>	89
<u>The Aim of the Present Study</u>	90

<u>The Connective Tissue Diseases</u>	91
<u>The Principal Clinical Characteristics of the Connective Tissue Diseases</u>	92
Systemic lupus erythematosus	92
Polyarteritis nodosa	94
Scleroderma	95
Polymyositis	96
Non-specified Connective Tissue Disease ..	97
<u>Human Populations Affected by Connective Tissue Diseases</u>	97
Systemic lupus erythematosus	98
Polyarteritis nodosa	99
Scleroderma	99
Polymyositis and Dermatomyositis	101
<u>Causative Hypotheses of Connective Tissue Diseases</u> ..	102
Systemic lupus erythematosus	102
Polyarteritis nodosa	103
Scleroderma	104
Polymyositis and Dermatomyositis	104
CHAPTER TWO	
THE DATA BASE	106
<u>Mortality and Morbidity</u>	108
<u>Source of Medical Morbidity Data</u>	109
<u>Collection of Morbidity Data</u>	111
<u>Diagnostic Confirmation of Definite Cases and the Reduction of Physician Bias in Recording</u>	113
<u>Admission and Onset</u>	115
<u>Confirmation of Location at Onset</u>	117
<u>Communication with Patients</u>	122
<u>Case Numbers</u>	123

	<u>Page No.</u>
<u>Population-at-Risk</u>	124
Population-at-risk at the County Scale ..	124
Population-at-risk at the Hospital Board Scale	125
Population-at-risk at the 'Regional' Scale ..	125
<u>Base Map</u>	126

CHAPTER THREE

THE SPACIO-TEMPORAL DEFINITION OF CONNECTIVE TISSUE DISEASE	127
<u>Method of Analysis</u>	127
Spatial Analysis	128
Temporal Change	132
<u>Areal Units</u>	133
<u>The Spatial and Temporal Definitions of Connective Tissue Disease</u>	136
Connective tissue diseases	136
Systemic lupus erythematosus	167
Polyarteritis nodosa	186
Scleroderma	198
Polymyositis and Dermatomyositis	216
<u>Possible Bias from the Availability of Manpower Resources</u>	231
<u>Summary</u>	234

CHAPTER FOUR

GEOGRAPHICAL EVIDENCE ON MEDICAL HYPOTHESIS ..	238
<u>Sex</u>	238
<u>Age at Onset</u>	239
Connective Tissue Diseases	240

<u>Age at Onset continued</u>							
Systemic lupus erythematosus	..	..	..	..	..	..	241
Polyarteritis nodosa	..	..	..	..	..	..	241
Scleroderma	..	..	..	..	..	..	242
Polymyositis and Dermatomyositis	..	..	..	..	..	..	243
<u>Race</u>	..	..	..	..	..	..	244
<u>Rural and Urban Distributions</u>	..	..	..	..	..	..	245
<u>Occupation</u>	..	..	..	..	..	..	247
<u>Connective Tissue Diseases and Sunshine</u>	..	..	..	..	..	..	250
Method	..	..	..	..	..	..	250
Results	..	..	..	..	..	..	251
<u>Summary</u>	..	..	..	..	..	..	254

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION	257
------------	----	----	----	----	----	----	-----

APPENDICES

Appendix A: The Scoring Systems used in the Survey	..	..	..	..	..	..	261
B: The Data Sheet	..	..	..	..	..	..	283
C: Public Hospitals Visited for Data	..	..	..	..	..	..	290
D: The Poisson Distribution	..	..	..	..	..	..	291
E: Case Numbers for Geographic Counties and Hospital Board Districts	..	..	..	..	..	..	292
F: Populations-at-risk for Geographic Counties 1951, 1961 and 1971 Census	295

BIBLIOGRAPHY	297
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LIST OF TABLES

I	Percentage distribution of the total connective tissue disease cases within the main cities of the study area	138
II	Percentages of the total cases of connective tissue diseases in each region	140
III	Crude incidence rates of connective tissue diseases per 100,000 population-at-risk (1971) by regions	141
IV	Cases of connective tissue diseases with onset in a specified time period	163
V	The number of cases of connective tissue disease with onset in respective time periods by Hospital Board Districts	166
VI	Ratios of medical staff to the population-at-risk in the principal Hospital Board Districts of the study area	232
VII	Male and female composition of each connective tissue disease subset	239
VIII	Percentages of connective tissue disease patients in different racial groups	245
IX	Percentages of total connective tissue diseases in the urban areas	246
X	Urban and rural case distribution of each connective tissue disease subset	247
XI	Significance test of the correlation between the spatial distribution of connective tissue diseases and sunshine hours	252
XII	Significance test of the correlation between the spatial distribution of polyarteritis nodosa and sunshine hours	253
XIII	Significance test of the correlation between the spatial distribution of scleroderma and sunshine hours	253

XIV	Significance test of the correlation between the spatial distribution of polymyositis and dermatomyositis and sunshine hours	254
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LIST OF FIGURESFigure

1	One of the first spot maps used by Seaman (1798, Plate 1) to depict yellow fever in New York in 1796	40
2	Shapter's map (1849) of the deaths from cholera in Exeter in 1832-34	43
3	Petermann's cholera map (1852) of the British Isles showing areas affected in 1831-3... .. .	45
4	Snow's dot map (1855) of cholera mortalities in the Broad Street area of London in September 1854 ..	46
5(A)	Bentley's map (1916) of malaria distribution in the Indian province of Bengal	52
5(B)	Bentley's map (1916) of population change in the Indian province of Bengal which shows the differential effects of malaria on the population	53
6.	Map of S.M.R.'s for males from bronchitis in England and Wales, 1948-57	59
7	Male S.M.R.'s from bronchitis, 1954-8, portrayed on a geographical base map	62
8	Male S.M.R.'s from bronchitis, 1959-63, portrayed on a demographic base map	63
9(A)	A dot distribution map of blind persons in the Luapula province of Zambia	74
9(B)	A 'rate' map of blind persons in the Luapula province of Zambia	75
10	Isopleths of S.M.R.'s for males (1965-66) from pneumonia in Australia	79
11	Areas of high S.M.R.'s for males from pneumonia in Australia in 1959-63 and 1965-66	80
12(A)	A 'rate' map of the occurrence of brain tumours in the counties of the Rzeszow District of Poland ..	83
12(B)	A map showing areas of the Rzeszow District of Poland with statistically significant divergences of the number of observed cases of brain tumours from expected cases	84

Figure

13	Location of study area	107
14	Spatial distribution of connective tissue disease cases..	137
15	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1971 census) of connective tissue disease by Hospital Board Districts	144
16	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of connective tissue disease by Hospital Board Districts, 1971 census	145
17	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1971 census) of connective tissue disease by Geographic Counties ..	147
18	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of connective tissue disease by Geographic Counties, 1971 census	149
19	'Iso-prob' map of connective tissue disease cases ..	151
20	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1961 census) of connective tissue disease by Hospital Board Districts	154
21	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1951 census) of connective tissue disease by Hospital Board Districts	155
22	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of connective tissue disease by Hospital Board Districts, 1961 census	156
23	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of connective tissue disease by Hospital Board Districts, 1951 census	157
24	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1961 census) of connective tissue disease by Geographic Counties ..	158
25	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1951 census) of connective tissue disease by Geographic Counties ..	159
26	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of connective tissue disease by Geographic Counties, 1961 census	161
27	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of connective tissue disease by Geographic Counties, 1951 census	162
28(A)	Connective tissue disease - number of case onsets (both sexes) per year of study time period	164

Figure

28(B)	Connective tissue disease - cumulative percentage histogram of case onsets per year	164
28(C)	(i) Connective tissue disease - number of male case onsets per year of study time period	165
	(ii) Connective tissue disease - number of female case onsets per year of study time period	165
29	Spatial distribution of systemic lupus erythematosus cases	168
30	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1971 census) of systemic lupus erythematosus by Hospital Board Districts	170
31	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of systemic lupus erythematosus by Hospital Board Districts, 1971 census	171
32	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1971 census) of systemic lupus erythematosus by Geographic Counties ..	173
33	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of systemic lupus erythematosus by Geographic Counties, 1971 census	174
34	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1961 census) of systemic lupus erythematosus by Hospital Board Districts	176
35	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1951 census) of systemic lupus erythematosus by Hospital Board Districts	177
36	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1961 census) of systemic lupus erythematosus by Geographic Counties ..	179
37	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1951 census) of systemic lupus erythematosus by Geographic Counties ..	180
38	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of systemic lupus erythematosus by Geographic Counties, 1961 census	181
39	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of systemic lupus erythematosus by Geographic Counties, 1951 census	182
40(A)	Systemic lupus erythematosus - number of case onsets per year of study time period	183
40(B)	Systemic lupus erythematosus - cumulative percentage histogram of case onsets per year	183

Figure

40(C)	Systemic lupus erythematosus - number of female case onsets per year of study time period	184
41	Spatial distribution of polyarteritis nodosa cases ..	187
42	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1971 census) of polyarteritis nodosa by Hospital Board Districts ..	189
43	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1971 census) of polyarteritis nodosa by Geographic Counties	190
44	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1961 census) of polyarteritis nodosa by Hospital Board Districts ..	192
45	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1951 census) of polyarteritis nodosa by Hospital Board Districts ..	193
46	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1961 census) of polyarteritis nodosa by Geographic Counties	194
47	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1951 census) of polyarteritis nodosa by Geographic Counties	195
48(A)	Polyarteritis nodosa - number of case onsets per year of study time period	197
48(B)	Polyarteritis nodosa - cumulative percentage histogram of case onsets per year	197
49	Spatial distribution of scleroderma cases	199
50	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1971 census) of scleroderma by Hospital Board Districts	201
51	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of scleroderma by Hospital Board Districts, 1971 census	202
52	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1971 census) of scleroderma by Geographic Counties	204
53	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of scleroderma by Geographic Counties, 1971 census	205
54	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1961 census) of scleroderma by Hospital Board Districts	207
55	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1951 census) of scleroderma by Hospital Board Districts	208

Figure

56	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of scleroderma by Hospital Board Districts, 1961 census	209
57	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of scleroderma by Hospital Board Districts, 1951 census	210
58	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1961 census) of scleroderma by Geographic Counties	211
59	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1951 census) of scleroderma by Geographic Counties	212
60(A)	Scleroderma - number of case onsets per year of study time period	214
60(B)	Scleroderma - cumulative percentage histogram of case onsets per year	214
61	Spatial distribution of polymyositis and dermatomyositis cases	217
62	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1971 census) of polymyositis and dermatomyositis by Hospital Board Districts	219
63	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of polymyositis and dermatomyositis by Hospital Board Districts, 1971 census	220
64	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1971 census) of polymyositis and dermatomyositis by Geographic Counties	222
65	Significant divergence of observed from expected numbers of cases of polymyositis and dermatomyositis by Geographic Counties, 1971 census	223
66	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1961 census) of polymyositis and dermatomyositis by Hospital Board Districts	225
67	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1951 census) of polymyositis and dermatomyositis by Hospital Board Districts	226
68	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1961 census) of polymyositis and dermatomyositis by Geographic Counties	227
69	Crude incidence rates per 100,000 population (1951 census) of polymyositis and dermatomyositis by Geographic Counties	228

Figure

70(A)	Polymyositis and dermatomyositis - number of case onsets per year of study time period	230
70(B)	Polymyositis and dermatomyositis - cumulative percentage histogram of case onsets per year	230
71	Age-sex structures of connective tissue diseases ..	240a
72	Significance test of the correlation between the spatial distribution of systemic lupus erythematosus and sunshine hours	251a

PART ONE

The Field of Medical Geography

CHAPTER ONE

HEALTH AND DISEASE

The preamble to the World Health Organisation defines health as

"a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."(1)

To Le Riche and Milner (1971, 81) this statement is

"euphonious, well-meaning and full of splendid idealism, but...it has very little tangible meaning. Perhaps it had better be regarded as a desirable ideal, rather than a definition of a particular condition in mankind."

Health is merely a concept and its standards will vary in different parts of the globe depending upon the availability of medical facilities, the acquisition of knowledge, and the dynamic impact of change in man's environment. Its real measure is the ability of the individual to function in a manner acceptable to himself and in harmony with factors likely to create stress upon his body (Le Riche and Milner, 1971). Health, as May (1958, 1961) suggests, is a complete adjustment of the organs of the body to each other and to environmental conditions. Here environment refers to those forces which act upon the living tissues, namely, both the natural (physical and biological) and socio-cultural realms of man.

Conversely, when there is a disruption of this equilibrium disease will manifest itself. Thus disease is

"a maladjustment of the living cells to their environment"
(May, 1958, 29).

Disease causation is rarely the consequence of a single, active, harmful factor but rather of a multiple aetiology. Of the numerous factors that may influence the occurrence of disease, however, two principal groups can be distinguished: endogenous factors or those which are inside the organism (e.g. the inherited constitution of the organism), and exogenous factors or those which are outside the body.² Therefore, if disease is viewed as the result of disruption of a state of balance between organism and environment, it may arise, according to Shoshin (1968, 9), in any of the following situations:

"firstly, when significant endogenous changes take place within the human organism which cannot be compensated by external factors; secondly, when sharp changes of external factors take place and the defensive resources of the organism are unable to ensure the requisite balance; thirdly, when there occur changes of both endogenous and exogenous environmental factors."

In each of these situations there are three basic components which can act in various combinations:

- a) the human organism with its accompanying endogenous factors;
- b) the reactivity and immunity of that organism; and
- c) the exogenous environmental factors.

Disease, or groups of diseases, result from the interaction of these three factors. Endogenous and exogenous factors therefore, will not only determine the patterns of occurrence of disease, or groups of diseases, but also their severity and spacio-temporal extent. Thus it may be better to think, as Banta and Fonaroff (1969, 88) suggest, of

"...degrees of health rather than of disease per se"

in which there is a continuum ranging from extreme maladjustment or death through slight illness to perfect adjustment (which would only rarely be attained in most human lives). Among populations, the degree of maladjustment is reflected crudely in morbidity and mortality indices which vary in rate through time and space.

The Role of Geography in Medical Research

By identifying the factor or group of factors, which, in combination, cause overt disease (or disrupt the balance of the organism with its environment) the first step is taken toward an understanding of the causation of disease. It then becomes possible, in the second step, to remove either that factor or one of those in a combination, and thus hopefully break the causative chain (Muir Grieve and Maytham, 1963). Geography can make an important contribution to the field of medical science, particularly in the first step, the identification of the disease causing factor or factors.

Medical geography may be defined as the study of the spatial variations and temporal changes of health and ill-health and

identifying causal relationships with the geographical environment. As a peripheral area of research, between the fields of geography and medicine, medical geography overlaps research areas of those disciplines within medical science which similarly investigate disease-environment relationships. Each field does, however, have a different emphasis.

Geographical pathology,³ as defined by Doll (1959, 11),

"is the comparative study of the incidence of disease and the distribution of physiological traits in peoples belonging to different communities throughout the world and the correlation of these data with features of the social and geographical environments."

Avtsyn and Javoronkov (1968) claim that the principal distinguishing feature between medical geography and geographical pathology is that the former studies the total geographical environment whereas the latter investigates the reaction of the organism to that environment.

Epidemiology⁴ is a similar search for disease aetiology but with emphasis upon the kinds, and structure of the affected populations.

Schwabe (1969, 160) succinctly states

"epidemiology is the study of diseases in populations of organisms - often with the object of their prevention or control."

Morris (1967, 275) believes that the utility of this research field derives

"...from the principle that in epidemiology whole 'populations' (or their samples) are studied and compared, and not particular individuals or patients."

Audy (1958, 102) questions the suitability of the term 'medical geography' as a name for the study of the distribution of diseases

over the world and their behaviour in any one community. According to him

"clear thinking may be hindered by emphasis on geography, which is associated in our minds with large scales and exotic places..."

He, therefore, proposes the use of the term 'medical ecology' to describe

"...the study of populations of man with special reference to environment and to populations of all other organisms as they affect his health and his numbers."

May (1952, 1967b) similarly has urged replacement of the term 'medical geography', with the 'ecology of health and disease'.

This latter term he suggests (1952, 2)

"...stresses the fact that this is primarily a study of environmental factors, and that the study of the environment of health cannot be separated from the study of the environment of disease, and that physiology cannot be separated from pathology if the latter is to be understood."

Learmonth (1970, 7) by defining medical ecology as

"the study of the web of relationships of a disease or disease complex in its physical and social environment on ecological sites",

finds the two fields of medical geography and medical ecology complementary though distinguishable. Medical geography in this terminology becomes an extension of medical ecology dealing with larger communities at the macro-geographic scale (Audy, 1958).

In light of the foregoing comments it is apparent, in Banta and Fonaroff's words (1969, 91), that

"disciplinary boundaries, for what they are worth, are hazy here, and hopefully will remain so."

Due to the multiple aetiology of most diseases, achieving

"the alleviation of human suffering and the eventual elimination of disease" (Muir Grieve and Maytham, 1963, 38),

will involve inter-disciplinary co-operation. McGlashan (1972b, 14)

observes that

"collaborative effort as co-members of an inter-disciplinary team is likely to yield best results and even the disciplines represented will vary with the individual problem which requires solution."

Whereas Schwabe (1969, 64) simply states that

"inter-disciplinary co-operation - the team approach - is the keystone of public health practice."

The initiation of any new evidence that may contribute to breaking the disease causative chain and/or prophylactic measures being formulated should be sufficient justification for conducting research whether in medical geography, geographical pathology, epidemiology, or medical ecology. Possibly the only way in which researchers in these fields can be distinguished from each other is by the discipline in which they have received their training. With a medical geographer his trained competence lies in geography and he is first of all a geographer (Learmonth, 1970, 8), whereas a geographical pathologist, according to Avtsyn and Javoronkov, (1968, 278) is first of all a doctor and a pathologist with a wide scope of interests.

The role of the medical geographer is to make the skills and techniques of geography available to medical science, but in no way to usurp the functions of workers in that field. McGlashan (1966a, 1969c, 1972b, 1973) has detailed four tasks which enable the geographer,

through his training and experience, to make a valuable contribution to medicine:

- a) to prepare and collate disease data and to map them to show their spacio-temporal distributions;
- b) to apply objective statistical tests to these distributions to assess whether or not the pattern is likely to have occurred by chance;
- c) to measure the degree of co-extensiveness between disease and other spatially and temporally varying factors. Generally the geographer will utilise medical hypotheses concerning disease aetiology as starting points for this further investigative stage; and
- d) to test whether the spatial or temporal associations that may have been shown could be causative.

Doll (1959, 1967), Hill (1965), and Hopps and Cuffey (1969) have drawn attention to the difficulties of establishing disease causality. In medical geography this problem assumes a greater complexity due to geography's inevitable generalisations about space and the inter-relatedness of variables within that space. Therefore, as McGlashan (1973, 220) has noted, hypothetical relationships formulated in medical geography must also be generalisations. Despite analysing many factors the one critical factor may not be considered in a medical geographic analysis because of data insufficiency or the inherent constraints of the study. For these reasons medical geographic studies may produce inconclusive answers. Nonetheless, the establishment of one new hypothesis or a positive or negative finding for a

current hypothesis for disease aetiology will be of value to medical science.

Medical geography is a 'tool for research' (Stamp, 1964a, 1964b) and rarely an end in itself. The consequence of medical geographic studies should be the provision of pointers for further research in other specialists fields, e.g. geobotany, geology and the medical sciences. As McGlashan (1972b, 14) states regarding hypotheses postulated in medical geographic studies

"the confirmation needed for such hypotheses will lie with a discipline which, rather than the group, studies each individual case."

With the continuing assimilation of quantitative analysis into geography, the increasing availability of the basic data (and refinement into a form applicable for utilisation in medical geographic studies), and the improvement in facilities for storing and processing that data, this tool is likely to become even more useful.