

## Historical keyword

### Dust

English or Anglo-Saxon in origin, the term dust initially referred simply to particles of earth or other matter small enough to be raised and carried by the wind. However, it rapidly acquired broader cultural connotations; thus, dust came to signify annihilation or a mark of repentance in religious observances, the ashes and mouldered remains of the dead in public and ecclesiastical imagination, or the perils posed by small and invisible elements of the cosmos.

During the early modern period, dust took on greater medical significance. In 1698, in the first English treatise on asthma, Sir John Floyer (1649–1734) identified dust as one of the environmental triggers of asthma attacks. It was, however, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution that dust emerged as a potent and more visible hazard in the modern world. Increasingly, advocates of the germ theory of disease emphasised the role of dust and dirt in transmitting infectious diseases. Anxieties about dust and disease, particularly in crowded urban environments, not only shaped approaches to the prevention and treatment of tuberculosis but also fuelled concerns about the dangers of Victorian fashion and domestic hygiene. At the same time, growing industrial activity spawned new forms of dust that generated various new, and sometimes fatal, respiratory diseases: during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, employees, manufacturers, and governments battled to regulate or eliminate the “deadly dusts” responsible for asbestosis, silicosis, and byssinosis. Contemporary formulations of dust are evident in the medical press at this time, ranging from John Tyndall’s *On Dust and Disease* (1870) to Mitchell Prudden’s *Dust and Its Dangers* (1903) or Robert Hessler’s *Dusty Air and Ill Health* (1912).

During the 20th century, dust acquired new meanings and associations. In the 1920s, North American allergists showed that asthmatic patients were often sensitive to an allergen in house dust. In 1967, Reindert Voorhorst identified the house-dust mite, *Dermatophagoides pteronyssinus*, as the agent supposedly responsible for rising trends in asthma and eczema in the modern world. As a result, house dust replaced pollen as the archetypal allergen and dust control focused increasingly on devising strategies to reduce levels of indoor air pollution rather than on regulating dust and smoke in the outdoor environment.

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## Lifeline

**Michael R Reich** is Taro Takemi Professor of International Health Policy at Harvard University. He trained in molecular biophysics and biochemistry and then earned a masters in East Asian Studies (Japan) and a doctorate in political science, all from Yale University. He lived in Japan from 1971 to 1974 and has visited nearly every year since.

**What has been the greatest achievement of your career?**  
Managing to survive on the Harvard faculty for 25 years.

**What is the most neglected field of medicine?**  
The dearth of serious political analysis of public health and medical issues, even in major international medical journals.

**Which event has had most effect on your work, and why?**  
A car crash with a bus in the Dominican Republic, in 1998, that nearly killed me and made me realise the dangers of road safety in developing countries, which I then pursued as a research theme and wrote about personally.

**What inspired you?**  
The realisation when I wrote my first book, *Island of Dreams: Environmental Crisis in Japan*, that the most important public-health problems are fundamentally about politics.

**Who was your most influential teacher, and why?**  
Shuichi Kato, one of Japan’s foremost postwar intellectuals and cultural historians, for his love of life and hatred of war. We wrote a book together (with R J Lifton), *Six Lives/Six Deaths: Portraits of Modern Japan*, in the mid-1970s.

**What is the best piece of advice you have received?**  
“If you want to be a duck, then you have to learn to quack like a duck”, from Dean Harvey Fineberg on the process of getting tenure at Harvard.

**How do you relax?**  
Watching my 18-year-old son, Gabriel, play football, because he is a fabulous player; however, some observers say that I do not look very “relaxed” when watching.

**What is your greatest regret?**  
Not being able to have a few more conversations with my father, who died on Jan 7, 2009.

**What apart from your family is the passion of your life?**  
Writing; this is what I have done for the past 40 years.

**What is your worst habit?**  
Trying to express my sense of humour.

**What was your first experiment as a child?**  
Trying to express my sense of humour.

**What is your idea of a perfect day?**  
A delicious meal with my good friend and co-author, Keizo Takemi as we chat in Japanese about a ton of topics.

**What keeps you awake at night?**  
My wife’s probing questions about the meaning of life, and what I plan to do about it the next day.



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