Weekly Writing Assignment #4:
Graphs, Graphs, Graphs!

-- Due in Section, week of 10/04 - 10/06 --

The assignments so far have focused on extracting arguments from secondary sources and finding meaning in primary sources. The readings for this week go in a different direction: analysis of quantitative health information. As explained in the study guide for the readings, quantitative analysis has many appeals and pitfalls. Good data can answer questions that cannot be addressed with written sources. But data can be incomplete or flawed, and even if the data are correct, they might not actually support the conclusions being drawn. Your job is to become a skillful consumer of health data, especially when that data is transformed into its most common form, a graph. As you will see, the readings this week are full of them: Omran has sixteen, the McKinlays twelve, Wilkinson seven, and Marmot six.

Your advice to the Mayor of New York about cholera epidemics helped him win re-election in 1832. You stay on as his health policy advisor and follow the twists and turns in his long career until the present day. He is now a senator, again up for re-election. The first debate did not go well. "We kept getting questions about health policy. My opponent must have been prepped. He kept putting up graph, after graph, after graph to prove his points. I didn't have any, I didn't understand his, and so I looked like an idiot. This morning I went to MIT's Open Courseware site and found a bunch of articles that had lots of graphs, but there are too many of them for me to sort out. Can you help?"

Specifically, the Senator wants you to sift through the articles and find the ONE graph that you think is most important, most useful, most interesting, or most surprising. He wants you to interpret the graph for him, identify its strengths and weaknesses, and explain why you chose that graph. Whenever his opponent pulls out graphs in the future, the Senator wants to be able to pull out your graph, say "what's actually important is…" and end up sounding like a sophisticated health policy analyst.

The Senator's attention span still has not improved, so keep your advice concise (200 words). Many of the graphs are important, useful, interesting, surprising -- there is not a right or wrong choice. We are interested in what caught your eye, and why. If you mention specific material from the text, or use quotations, please provide page numbers.