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Sommario/riassunto

Visiting relatives and friends in medical institutions is a common practice in all corners of the world. People probably go into hospitals as a visitor more frequently than they do as a patient. Permeable Walls is the first book devoted to the history of hospital and asylum visiting and deflects attention from medical history's more traditionally studied constituencies, patients and doctors. Covering the eighteenth to the late twentieth centuries, and taking case studies from around the globe, the authors demonstrate that hospitals and asylums could be remarkably permeable institutions. However, policies towards visitors have varied from outright exclusion, as in the case of some isolation hospitals in Victorian Britain, to near open access in the first Chinese missionary hospitals. Historical studies of visitors and visiting, as a result, tell us much about the changing relationship between healthcare institutions and the communities they serve. These histories are particularly relevant at a time when service providers seek ways to involve patients' representatives in healthcare decision making; to control hospital super-bugs; and to make the hospital environment accessible yet safe and secure. With the re-emergence of restricted visiting, the subject remains one of the most emotive topics in the history of institutional medicine. Adopting a wide-ranging definition of visitors, from official inquirers to family members, Permeable Walls provides an innovative perspective on hospitals and asylums historically and will interest historians of medicine, charity and governance, as well as healthcare policy-makers.