



### **CLINICAL METHOD — A GENERAL PRACTICE APPROACH**

*Robin C. Fraser*  
*Butterworths, Guildford (1987)*  
 87 pages. Price £6.95

This little book tackles a large subject under a rather grandiose title. It has a foreword by Marshall Marinker, who held the Foundation Chair in Community Health at the University of Leicester, and a preface as well as several chapters by Robin Fraser, at present Leicester's Professor of General Practice. This arrangement seems to describe the blood-line of the book — by undergraduate experience out of *The future general practitioner*. This is not a bad pedigree and has produced quite a workmanlike progeny; a book which will be informative to any service general practitioner considering taking medical students in his practice.

The authors, all from the Department of General Practice at Leicester, had the immediate aim of helping students 'to gain maximum benefit from a period of exposure to, and teaching in, the setting of general practice as part of their basic medical education'. I am sure that for students in the Leicester curriculum they achieve this aim well even if some of their content seems to me otiose. A statement such as '... if a deep-seated personality disorder is identified, the patient must be referred to a specialist psychotherapist' does not seem likely to add much to a student's understanding of clinical method.

The use of the student handouts from one medical school as a textbook suitable for courses at another may well be one milestone in the development of an academic subject. The fault may be in me or in general practice but, despite its pedigree, this book does not mark that milestone.

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### **THE TRUTH ABOUT AIDS**

*Patrick Dixon*  
*Kingsway Publications, Eastbourne (1987)*  
 251 pages. Price £4.95

My initial reaction to this book was: 'not another paperback about AIDS'. However, this is a useful and interesting book that patients will read and benefit from.

Patrick Dixon's background is as a member of a terminal care team in London and as a church leader. The book reflects and benefits from both of these experiences. The contents can be divided into three main areas: facts about AIDS, the Christian response, and the role of hospices in terminal care. The facts are well organized and the book is easy to read. There are particularly good chapters on the reliability of condoms and what the role of the government and the church in the AIDS crisis

should be. The author also tackles the thorny question of whether AIDS is the 'wrath of God', with a clarity and sensitivity that other church leaders could learn from.

My only disappointment with this book lies in its discussion of the role of the general practitioner. The author reiterates the stereotype of the unsympathetic general practitioner who cannot be trusted with confidential information, and there is too little emphasis on the need to develop primary care services for those people who wish to die at home.

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### **SUICIDE**

**Clinical and epidemiological studies**  
*Brian Barraclough with Jennifer Hughes*  
*Croom Helm, London (1987)*  
 188 pages. Price £22.50

The objective of this publication is to improve knowledge about the possibilities of preventing suicide. The studies demonstrate the importance of mental illness, social isolation and social distress in the aetiology of suicide and quantify these aspects which have had anecdotal support from practising family doctors for many years.

This being so, few general practitioners are likely to find this book of any great practical value. However, for those with trainees who wish to see the facts for themselves and reach their own conclusions the book does show how scientific methods of systematic observation and hypothesis testing can be applied to phenomena related to suicide and in turn how such application can lead to a quantification of the importance of the various aetiological factors.

Finally, by scrutinizing the evidence for the success of lay efforts to prevent suicide by counselling the high risk person, the author shows that little effect on outcome is achieved. This is sad news for organizations such as the Samaritans but emphasizes the importance of the prevention and treatment of mental illness in primary care.

CLIVE FROGGATT  
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### **BIRTHPLACE**

**Report of the confidential enquiry into facilities available at the place of birth conducted by the National Birthday Trust**  
*G. Chamberlain and P. Gunn*  
*John Wiley, Chichester (1987)*  
 291 pages. Price £29.50

This volume is the fourth of a series commissioned by the National Birthday Trust, the best known of its forerunners being

the *Perinatal mortality survey of 1958 and British births 1970*. It presents a fascinating account of the equipment, services and personnel available in Britain's maternity hospitals on the first day of each of four months from August to November 1984. Hospitals were divided into four categories by the number of deliveries they handled each year. It is salutary to learn that the 217 small hospitals, which constitute 41% of the total and must be predominantly general practitioner units, were responsible for only 5% of all deliveries in the year surveyed and it is thus not surprising that their cost effectiveness has been questioned.

Staff on duty at four specific times in a 24-hour period, together with the number of women currently in labour, gave an indication of staffing levels related to workload. Staffing levels appear to be significantly lower in small units, especially at night. The obstetric, anaesthetic, flying squad and paediatric facilities available were also considered, again by date, time and size of unit and the results are detailed in numerous charts and tables.

Special chapters are devoted to home deliveries occurring on the sample days (just 1.0% of the total) and also to the small units delivering 'less than one a day'. The latter group comprised a total of 200 units (38% of the total) and one quarter of them were only delivering one patient a week or fewer. Professor Chamberlain's conclusion is that small is not beautiful; obviously in sparsely populated areas small units will still be required but their economy and efficacy need constant examination. Where populations are denser and communications good, women and their relatives can travel easily to central units. The continued provision of small units may prove too costly and concentration of staff and equipment may prove to be a wiser solution.

This volume is a mine of information regarding obstetric facilities in the UK. Clearly it is an important book of reference for epidemiologists and maternity care planners. However, at £29.50 it is more likely to be found on the shelves of medical libraries than on the premises of general practitioners.

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#### **A COLOUR ATLAS OF ALLERGY**

*William F. Jackson and Rino Cerio  
Wolfe Medical Publications, Ipswich (1987)  
126 pages. Price £35.00*

This book is one of a series of medical atlases of diagnostic colour photography. It starts with a chapter on mechanisms in allergy which provides a topical review of the intricacies of the body's immune system. Next, the investigation of allergic disorders is dealt with in some detail and there follows a systematic account of allergic conditions. There are chapters on allergic skin disorders, drug allergies and allergic disorders of the eye, nose and ear, lung and gastrointestinal tract. Food allergies and autoimmune diseases are also described. The complexities of immunodeficiency and the subtle defects of humoral and cellular immunity are being increasingly recognized. The authors stress that the current epidemic of the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) has led to an expansion of interest in the nature and causes of immunodeficiency.

The outstanding colour photographs in this atlas are particularly noteworthy, aiding the textual descriptions. This is an interesting and informative book which provides a valuable review of a complex field which has expanded considerably in recent years.

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#### **THE SANCTITY-OF-LIFE DOCTRINE IN MEDICINE**

*Helga Kuhse  
Oxford University Press (1987)  
235 pages. Price £25.00*

'Not killing, but letting die' has traditionally seemed a useful distinction. Dr Kuhse suggests that it is useful mainly as a means of avoiding moral responsibility and that in practice it may prolong suffering. This book is a convincing attack on theories which defend the absolute sanctity of human life, but which also defend 'letting die' in certain cases. These theories, Dr Kuhse argues, usually let in by the back door the very quality of life considerations which they claim should have no place in life and death decisions. Particular targets of her detailed philosophical analysis are the killing/letting die distinction, the principle of double effect and the notion of ordinary and extraordinary means. Many philosophers have written on these subjects, but Dr Kuhse's book is the most comprehensive recent critique. While including some rather technical philosophical discussion, her arguments raise important practical questions for medicine, in particular about when it may be right to kill. Those who believe that it is never right to do so, now have a very formidable case to answer.

Dr Kuhse concludes by claiming that responsible life and death decisions should now be based on quality rather than sanctity of life. This undervalues what the defenders of sanctity of life are trying to defend; and quality of life criteria too, of course, are not without their problems. Thus, while one cannot but applaud Dr Kuhse's admirably efficient demolition job, one must wait to see what will rise on the empty site.

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#### **CHILD AND ADOLESCENT HEALTH FOR PRACTITIONERS**

*N. Buchanan (Ed)  
Williams and Wilkins, London (1987)  
505 pages. Price £57.00*

This is a fairly traditional romp through the standard child health disorders. There is no lack of expertise among the 40 contributors and although the authors are predominantly Australian paediatricians, the management policy for common disorders in the subcontinent seems similar to that in the United Kingdom. The problems of the preschool child and the school child are well described and the authors make a genuine attempt to address adolescent problems, but the paucity of information on teenage health creates some difficulty for the contributors. However, for a book of 35 chapters which attempts to be comprehensive there are a number of striking omissions. There is no chapter on the epidemiology of ill health in childhood, there is little mention of ethical issues in paediatrics with ethics not even mentioned in the index, and the problems of drug abuse and smoking are notable by their absence.

It is difficult to decide for whom the book is written. If aimed at the general practitioner, then the lack of any contributions by general practitioners is surprising, but this may reflect the fact that academic general practice in Australia has yet to provide any substantial contributions in the field of child care. I doubt very much if this book can compete with similar textbooks available in the UK.

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