

Book Reviews

Problems and progress in medical care. Essays on current research—Second series. Edited by GORDON MCLACHLAN. London. Oxford University Press for the Nuffield Provincial Hospitals Trust. 1966. Price 25s. 0d.

This fascinating and readable collection of essays and reports is the second series from the Nuffield Provincial Hospitals Trust on Problems and Progress in Medical Care. Presented in three sections, the studies cover a wide range of organizational problems in the National Health Service, from Hospital Outpatient Services to Cervical Cytology, from An Experiment in Communication between General Practitioners and Hospital Staff to the Future of the Maternity Services.

Taken as a whole they are a sobering exposure of the Topsy-like development of the health service, which even after 18 years lacks the benefit of much basic research and is therefore too often unrelated either to demand or available resources, especially in trained medical personnel. They perform a valuable service in underlining the urgent need for further research and indicating some of the more profitable lines on which this work should be directed.

The first section contains four reports of investigations into the outpatient services of differing groups of hospitals from north-east Scotland to south-east England, the Edinburgh hospitals and a London teaching hospital. Though not strictly comparable investigations, since varying methods were used and different factual information sought, they all demonstrate the inefficiency and waste involved in existing outpatient arrangements, and highlights the necessity for reorganization based on local requirements. Not surprisingly all the surveys emphasized the inadequacy of communications between hospitals and general practitioners and between hospitals and patients, though it is comforting to find that the quality of the general practitioners' referral letter has some bearing on the quality and speed of the hospital answer. On the other hand, a majority of general practitioners' referral letters could be improved with benefit both to the patient and the service, by more definite indication of the reason for referral whether for diagnosis, consultation or therapy. This has some bearing on the unnecessarily large follow-up of outpatients noted in all the surveys. In Edinburgh 13 per cent of follow-up cases stopped attending of their own accord. The north-east Scotland report suggested that 31 per cent of referrals could have been entered directly on the waiting list without being processed through outpatients. Two of the investigations suggested reducing the pressure on specialist outpatient clinics by an extension of open facilities for minor treatment to general practitioners. Appointment systems are often unsatisfactory and need to

be more flexible, related to local conditions and the discipline of the individual specialty. Above all, as the editor Gordon McLachlan points out in the introduction, there is need "for the institution of machinery . . . to make a continuous review of the referral of patients for diagnosis and treatment; and, of equal importance, of the retention of patients by outpatient departments". Two other interesting facts emerged from these inquiries, general practitioners in partnerships use diagnostic facilities a great deal more than single-handed practitioners ("19 practices, all single-handed, made no use of either laboratory or x-ray services during the three months of the review") and rather surprisingly the greater the use made of diagnostic facilities, the greater the referrals to outpatient departments.

Part two presents four papers dealing with the transitional hostel in the rehabilitation of the mentally ill, the working of an experimental pre-discharge ward, cost effectiveness and the engineering services in hospitals and an experiment in communication between general practitioner and hospital staff. Since national policy has ordained the opening of 24 transitional hostels yearly until 1974, it is disturbing to find those studied operating as "chronic wards in the community" rather than halfway houses between the mental hospital and the home. Two reasons are suggested for this, the difficulty in recruiting staff of the requisite quality and the lack of appreciation of the true function of such hostels by the authorities responsible for them.

The Experimental Pre-discharge Ward established at Dryburn Hospital, County Durham, seems to have "made a valuable contribution to the efficiency of, and to the quality of care offered by, the hospital" though whether the original objective of ensuring the availability of beds for those requiring immediate admission to hospital has been achieved it is not possible to determine from this two-year study. But clearly the experiment was worth while and should be repeated in other hospitals.

Another paper reports the result of an experiment in Aberdeen, where a telephone recording service was made available for general practitioners to dictate over the telephone requests for appointments and the letter to accompany the patient. The service is enthusiastically accepted by a quarter of the general practitioners referring cases to the Royal Infirmary, and consultants have noted an improvement in the quality and value of the letters so dictated.

Under the heading of Examining the Bases of Policy, part three of the book deals with the maternity services, cervical cytology and the level of dental health. Since 1965 a group of clinicians, sociologists and administrators has at the invitation of the Trust, considered "ways of clarifying problems posed by the maternity services". Their deliberations are here admirably summarized along with their advice on future action in this field. An appendix enumerates an impressive series of investigations now in progress as a result of their work. The essay on cervical cytology contributed by Dr E. G. Knox should be studied by everyone concerned with the problem of cervical cancer. He points out that until the natural history of pre-invasive lesions is clarified, the use and value of cervical

screening techniques cannot be assessed, and he outlines a population study which could provide the relevant information.

The book is well printed and presented and is a valuable contribution to our understanding of some of the problems besetting the National Health Service. It should certainly be read by all those concerned with the organization and development of the National Health Service, and could be read with profit and interest by every doctor.

A study of doctors. Mutual selection and the evaluation of results in a training programme for family doctors. MICHAEL BALINT, ENID BALINT, ROBERT GOSLING and PETER HILDEBRAND. London. Tavistock Publications Limited. 1966. Pp. xii + 146. Price 28s. 0d.

This book is about the Tavistock seminars. Their aim is to develop in general practitioners a sensitivity to their patients' emotional problems, to enable them to understand these problems more safely and at greater depth, and then to help them to acquire skills in using this understanding in treatment. It is of great interest to know whether the seminars succeed in these aims. Unfortunately their evaluation is a task of the greatest possible difficulty. This book takes certain limited steps in attempting it. No attempt is made to decide by before and after study of performance whether the seminars produce better general practitioners; this would be impossible at present, though it is desirable. The authors do examine success or failure of the applicants to the course by such measures as their length of stay in it and their ability to learn and modify their management of patients as judged by what they said and did in the seminar. In particular they examine the effect of introducing a selection procedure for applicants. The selection procedure in fact reduced the number of failures and saved hurt to the unsuccessful applicants as well as to the seminar leaders.

The study suggests that the seminars benefit doctors in their 30's and 40's more than older men or women. But perhaps the most striking finding is that 55 per cent of general practitioners are unlikely to be able to benefit at all from this type of training because they will find it uncongenial. The remainder will be able to tolerate the experience, but only 20 per cent of the total will be able "to acquire a commendable amount of diagnostic and therapeutic skill". The rating-scale on which an estimate of success or failure is made is very elaborate. At this stage this is probably unavoidable but it does make this a complex book to read; it demands that the reader already has considerable interest. The authors bring great integrity to their judgment of their own work; their writing is for the most part very clear.

The Tavistock seminars have made a most important contribution to general practice, not only in this country. One of the interests of this book is a comparative evaluation of similar training schemes in other countries.