

Control of human fertility. British Medical Bulletin Vol. 26, No. 1. London. The British Council. 1970. Pp. 97. Price £2. (£2.00).

This issue is devoted to an account of ongoing research into fertility control—including contraception, sub-fertility, sterilization and legal abortion. Several articles describe the experimental approach and the accounts of comparative physiology are nowhere more intriguing than in the paper on the "Mode of action of intra-uterine devices." The startling conclusion is that there is no satisfactory explanation of their contraceptive action in women. The epidemiological studies include an article by Doll and Vessey in which the College's contribution is not overlooked. Potts and Swyer make a brave attempt to compare the mortality of 'pill' users with the users of other contraceptives—a difficult task which must remain partially conjectural since many vital data are incomplete. Hopes for a better alternative to the present oral contraceptives for women are unlikely to be fulfilled for several years. Indeed, a satisfactory systemic contraceptive for men might well be available first, although the very real problem of inadequate motivation is nowhere mentioned. For those with anything more than a passing interest in one of the world's most pressing problems, this issue of the *British Medical Bulletin* will be compulsory reading.

Human guinea pigs. Experimentation on man. M. H. Pappworth, M.D. Harmondsworth. Penguin Books. 1969. Pp. 320. Price 7s. 0d. (35p.).

The reviewer of this book now appearing in a paperback edition will be pardoned if he associates it with Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring*. Both books take an aspect of science not normally considered or understood by lay people and select instances and examples, and each author uses quotations to emphasize the case to be made. The case is that what is done is wrong. In each the author conveys a sense of mission to put things right and it is for the reader to assess whether this burning desire to get the message over does not defeat itself through insistent repetition of one side of the argument. Such repetition is, however, undoubtedly likely to influence the lay public who are not told of the benefits to mankind either in terms of scientific or medical advance.

The medical reader must regret the author's apparent lack of objectivity for he is accustomed to weigh evidence with care rather than to allow himself to be engulfed by it. The general practitioner in particular thinks in terms of observational research, watching experiments conducted by time and chance and nature which present to him as illnesses to be recorded and treated. Perhaps it could be said that every diagnosis made is but the prelude to an experiment in

therapy, but to Dr Pappworth such activities would lie within the terms of reference of the 'physician-friend' for whom he postulates the need.

Though general practitioners are unlikely to become involved in experimental research the patients for whom they are responsible may be. Thus family doctors have a responsibility in the matter even if it is at one remove. In Britain the customary approach to hospital care is through the general practitioner who selects the specialist whose skill is appropriate to the patient's need, he is concerned that the skill should be there though he may not have uppermost in his mind the ways in which it may have been achieved.

Both this book and *Silent Spring* were undoubtedly written to create an impact on the public mind and no doubt both will do so. The effect of this book upon doctors will be to give them pause for thought, for objective consideration in their way of an emotionally-charged subject which the author has handled in his way. In a sense this exercise will be undertaken in spite of the book, as much as because of its publication, for many may be put off by its messianic cast, and the inclusion in the index of nothing but personal names of those to whom reference has been made in the text will be held distasteful by some. Nonetheless the matter of human experimentation raises moral issues of importance to all in medical practice and it is as well that we should look at them, both con's and pro's alike.

New edition

A student's guide to geriatrics. Second edition. TREVOR H. HOWELL, M.R.C.S., F.R.C.P.E., London. Staples Press. 1970. Pp. 212. Price £2 5s. 0d. (£2.25)

This book is claimed to be written "for the senior student and the recently qualified doctor who encounters the problems of the aged for the first time." Most general practitioners, however, will find something of use and interest in its pages. All aspects of geriatric medicine are well covered, and the material is up to date both from the viewpoint of therapeutics and the newer concepts of disease. In addition to the conventional chapter headings of 'Cardiovascular disease' and 'Respiratory disease', there are useful sections on 'Rehabilitation' 'Special problems in geriatrics', 'Social medicine' and 'Surgery in old age'. Mental disorders in the old are particularly well dealt with and great stress is laid on the importance of underlying (often treatable) physical causes for mental confusion.

There appear to be too many statistical tables, especially in the first half of the book. A high proportion of these are based—perhaps logically, but depressingly—on postmortem findings.