

ance in science subjects was and is, not only in Aberdeen, but one of several criteria that are used to select students. Age, sex, domicile, number of attempts at English 'A' levels or Scottish highs, and a detailed school report are all taken into account as well.

In Aberdeen we do not routinely interview applicants because there is no evidence that interview clarifies, and some evidence that it confuses, the central question—has this boy or girl the intellectual abilities and the personality characteristics to sustain him or her through a long, arduous, science-based course of training for the practice of one of the many fields of medical endeavour?

In passing, let me suggest that Dr Stephen read *The Lancet's* newly published careers booklet, *The Scope of Medicine*, which should convince him that there is room in modern medicine for a variety of personality types.

Since we do not have neat valid profiles of the kind of people who make good family doctors, or hospital specialists, or community physicians (and even if such profiles were available, could we discern them in 18–19-year olds?), because adolescents mature at varying and unpredictable rates, and because there is much yet to be documented about the learning process, it is just not possible to forecast with high accuracy which candidates will do better than others in medical school. But we do know that, at present, the evidence of ability shown in school examinations, and the evidence of industry and interest as attested by teachers, offer the firmest basis for predicting success in the undergraduate medical course. This, I submit, is better

for everyone than whatever alternative Dr Stephen has in mind—an alternative that he does not state and which, therefore, can hardly be said to be saner, wiser, or more just. (Would he care to tell us on what criteria he would reject?)

I know enough about the College of General Practitioners to be quietly confident that many, if not most, of its members will wish to dissociate themselves from Dr Stephen's proposed attack on the Universities—and might even agree that his letter reveals the very "entrenched and myopic" attitudes he attributes to people like me.

I write in sorrow, not in anger. My sorrow is compounded from experience—experience of failure in students who either did not have the ability to learn or who had learned in the wrong subjects, experience of young people who did not gain a place because enough places are just not available, experience of the inadequacy of current knowledge on the right criteria for selection—and last, but not least, experience of uninformed, unsubstantiated, and unworthy criticism by those who have little or no personal experience of the selection process.

I. M. RICHARDSON

*Professor of General Practice*

University Medical Buildings,  
Foresterhill,  
Aberdeen, AB9 2ZD.

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## Book reviews

**Present state and future needs of general practice** (1973). Third edition. London: Royal College of General Practitioners. Price: £1.50.

The third edition of this well-known college publication is very welcome. At a time when Britain is entering Europe and a major reorganisation of the National Health Service is in sight there is a great need for facts and figures from general practice.

Much of the work this time has been done by Dr John Fry and this volume clearly bears his stamp, especially in the emphasis on the setting of general practice in relation to other forms of medical care and in the comparisons with medical organisation in other countries.

One major development is the challenge made here to the idea of general practice as "primary care". This edition places general practice as a form of secondary care after self-care. The implications of this are considerable both in terms of

health education, access to other sources of care (such as pharmacists) and in the extent of delegation likely to occur in general practice in the future.

One particularly valuable feature is the further development of the concept of the average practice with an analysis of the major and minor medical and social incidents which can be expected in the course of a year. Although such a hypothetical practice does not exist, a yardstick is valuable for us all.

One of the more disturbing facts is the continuing fall of younger practitioners, and especially the relative deficiency of British-trained principals entering the National Health Service.

The section on the use of the hospital services is most valuable. Here there is much useful information on the number of specialists, the trends in outpatient referrals, inpatient admissions, and the rate of domiciliary visits. One famous maxim "that general practitioners care for 90 per cent of all episodes of illness alone" is sharply disputed.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that one third of all a general practitioner's patients reach hospital each year by one route or another.

This report is at its best in documenting and bringing up to date the organisational changes in general practice itself. The introduction of appointment systems and the move towards group practice are well illustrated.

Small volumes of this kind inevitably face the dilemma of deciding on the one hand how far to go on bringing data up to date, and on the other hand, how much to reshape the presentation to introduce new ideas. All this information is competently presented in short, readable sections. The authors can be proud to have covered so much ground in so few pages.

However, it is noticeably stronger in the sections on "present state" than in the consideration of "future needs". There is no reference to the immense implications for general practice of the introduction of computers or even a discussion of the change in the size of the National Health Service medical records. The possibility of a different system of record keeping such as the problem-orientated record is not mentioned.

Somehow, at the end, I was left looking for more. This sense of expectation arose from the absence of comment on the content of the consultation in general practice today. The approach in this report is epidemiological and the emphasis is mechanistic rather than medical—organisational rather than clinical. The intellectual challenge of modern practice now lies more in the problems of caring for patients than in the methods of arranging that care. In prescribing, for example, this report considers only the cost aspect and makes no mention of many of the dramatic changes in general-practitioner activity—such as the prescribing of oral contraceptives for one in six of the whole British female population of childbearing age; the dilemma as whether to prescribe cholesterol-lowering agents; or the achievement of some practitioners of eliminating amphetamines entirely.

The figures on the number of health visitors now attached to practices do not reveal the changes in child care which are occurring such as practice children's clinics and more developmental surveillance.

There have also been some interesting developments in the further involvement of general practitioners in preventive medicine including the screening of postgastrectomy patients and the increase in cervical cytology tests. It is not stated that in the first half of 1971 the number of cervical smears taken in general practice exceeded for the first time the number taken by local-authority medical and nursing staff.

Certainly it is necessary for this edition to be read in conjunction with the College's other recent publication, *The Future General Practitioner—Learning and Teaching* to which it is complementary.

However, just as practice organisation is an essential prelude to good clinical care so perhaps

this excellent survey of organisational developments in practice may prove a prelude to future reports from the College on the present state and future needs of the *clinical* aspects of general practice.

D. J. PEREIRA GRAY

**The preterm baby—and other babies with low birth weight.** B. Mary Crosse. Pp. 290 + x. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone. Price: £3.00.

The seventh edition of a book which many physicians must have used during the past 25 years has now appeared. Its change of title (from *The Premature Baby*) epitomises the change of approach to the problems of light-weight babies which has occurred over the past decade or more—distinguishing those that are full-term ('light for dates') from those that are pre-term (less than 37 weeks gestation).

The size of the problem is evident from the figures of the 1958 Prenatal Mortality Survey, in which babies of less than 2,500 grams birthweight contributed seven per cent of all babies and carried a prenatal mortality rate of 267 per thousand live births (compared with 33 per thousand live births for birthweights of over 2,500 grams). Moreover in the years since 1958 the incidence of low-weight babies is known to have increased, and their still-birth rate to have declined considerably.

Since the majority (perhaps two in every three) of light weighters are pre-term babies, it is logical enough that the book starts by dealing with some of the physiological deficits they face—though some readers may wish that this basic physiological material had been more fully discussed.

Thereafter, the book is mainly concerned with the problems facing the light-weight baby during the period it is still in hospital and prior to its discharge home. General practitioners may, therefore, be inclined to set aside this book as of little immediate interest to them—particularly in an era when an increasing percentage of births occur in major maternity units. Nevertheless, there are two good reasons for the general practitioner being familiar with the problems of light-weight babies—firstly, the increased infant mortality to which they are prone, and the implications which light birthweight has for the child's development; and secondly, the mother's need for an opportunity to ventilate her anxieties and questions to her doctor, when the child returns home.

Areas of this book are not easy to read—partly because of the profusion of references (admirable in itself), and the author's habit of stringing extracts together. This at times produces more the semblance of a catalogue with which the reader must wrestle rather than any distillation of experience (the brief section on antenatal care, for example, reads like an inventory of technological armamentaria without any critical comment on its