

Administration in General Practice (1975). HELEN OWEN. London: Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd. Price: £3.50.

How many of us really know about administration in general practice? It is a subject which we all take for granted, either leaving it to others to solve any problems which arise or just leaving it in the hope that the problem will go away!

For many years now doctors have been involved with the administration of their practices, usually burning the midnight oil in completing the quarterly and monthly forms. Often a great deal of the doctor's income has been overlooked by not realising the need to claim for the numerous item-of-service payments available to him.

The attitude of many doctors in the past has been to rely heavily on themselves and their wives for the running of the practice. If they had any receptionist or secretarial help it was invariably limited in time and scope. The picture is thus painted of the blundering doctor, too tired to cope with form filling because of overwork; invariably because of poor administration in the daily routine of the practice, subsidising the National Health Service because he has not realised how to claim for the wide variety of payments due to him. Is it any wonder then that a book such as this one by Helen Owen is long, long overdue?

It is a delight to see the difficult task of covering most of the topics of administration in a book of about 140 pages. One could argue that this merely scratches the surface of the subject. I agree most certainly! However, underneath the 'scratch marks' will be found a wealth of information which is truly essential to producing effective standards in primary medical care. Helen Owen has succeeded in writing a book which is readable, informative, and stimulating. It will provide a base line for many doctors and secretarial staff, nurses and health visitors to help assess the needs of the patients and themselves and then to organise the administration tailored to that need.

Throughout the pages of the book the atmosphere described is for the ideal situation. The frequent use of words such as 'trust', 'loyalty', 'important' and 'understanding' is revealing. I believe that this is the one doubt I have of the author. How in this imperfect world does one

find or train people who can assume this ideal role and transmit this idealism to the place where she works? The Association of Medical Secretaries may be the first step on the road to training an adequate number of these highly sought after practice managers. But are their standards high enough? How many of them will be able to provide a sympathetic and understanding view when a really awkward situation arises and causes intra practice tension? I suspect not many of them and yet this is the heart of the problem. Around an effective practice manager revolves the well being of the practice. It is therefore crucial to have a practice policy determined by the partners with the administrative guidance of the practice manager which is clear and fair to all.

There are two topics where Helen Owen has skimmed over. The first is research. She devotes just five pages to this subject. The administrative problems in research are many. Perhaps in further editions she may care to elaborate. Many doctors contemplating research have a prime difficulty in following even the most fundamental steps to providing first-class results and consequently do not bother. Five pages will not meet that need. The second topic is trade unions and their role in administration. In this age of trade union omnipotence many doctors are finding their staff organising themselves into 'shop floors' with union membership. It will become necessary for all general practitioners to understand and organise their own thoughts, with the spectre of disputes, demarcation and job definition arising, so as to meet effectively and counter any detrimental proposals to the practice well being. Guidance from a book like this will be all important.

Finally, I would like to see all trainees in vocational training schemes reading this book as part of their essential reading list. It is a topic which they would do well to understand clearly. For by doing so they will be able to organise general practice in the future to attain standards of primary care never hitherto attained. That standard is surely what we all must seek and attain. Administration and organisation is an integral part of that standard and this book and future editions could well play a part in helping us all to that goal.

ARTHUR PRINCE

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The continued increase in the average number of applications per vacancy was due mainly to the number of doctors applying who originally qualified overseas. Checks made from time to time indicated that well over 75 per cent of applicants had come to this country after qualifying overseas, mainly from India and Pakistan. About 40 per cent of the doctors appointed to vacancies originally qualified overseas.

REFERENCE

The Family Practitioner Services (1976). 3, No. 2. 25.