

The changing face of medicine

A series on BBC television
from a Journal correspondent

The phrase 'Your life in their hands' is a cliché that provokes a shiver of apprehension, a sigh of resignation, a moment of doubt, and almost certainly a memory of Dr Charles Fletcher's voice, smooth yet gravelly, describing off-screen the surgical operations and medical melodramatics which the BBC broadcast 15 years ago. In November 1975 three more documentaries were made, again with Dr Fletcher as linkman. One measure of change is not only that he has become a professor, but that he is identified by name; how are the bastions of propriety falling!

The audience research department of the BBC made an "enquiry into some of the reactions to, and effects of, television programmes on medical topics, with particular reference to *The changing face of medicine* series." The study was in several parts. The first, two days after each broadcast, was to interview 150 people in the street who had watched the programme. The second was to send postal questionnaires to a random sample of 2,000 people three weeks before the series began and a very similar questionnaire to the same people three weeks after it had ended. The third part was a postal questionnaire to a random sample of 2,275 general practitioners a few weeks after the programmes ended.

The findings of this enquiry have been compiled into a large dull-looking document of 60 pages or so. There were several things that interested your correspondent a great deal. The first was the arbitrary size of the audience; the largest—and the largest of general practitioners also—was for the programme that happened to follow the 'Miss World' competition. In spite of some doctors' feeling that patients think of nothing but their own health, the lay sample rated cancer half way down a list of things they worried about; this was far below vandalism and inflation, with heart attacks and mental illness right down at the bottom.

Although the BBC's report does not say so explicitly, it seems from the tables of results that the programmes had little effect on the public's knowledge and understanding of medicine, since just as many misunderstood the new treatment of Parkinson's disease as were made to realise the continuing need for immunisation against polio. It must, in fact, have disappointed the producers of the series that their programmes were far out-viewed, as it were, by a play about a woman with breast cancer that was broadcast a fortnight later. It appeared that the play had a strong effect on those who watched it, for they became much more worried about cancer than those who had not seen it, even though most commented favourably on the programme and said it was "very good" and "true to life."

Attitudes to illness are extremely important and, along with family tradition, determine more than anything else why people go to their doctor. This audience research by the BBC shows how hard it is to change attitudes, even with three high-class documentaries. This may not be altogether bad, however, for otherwise doctors would be at the mercy of every bad programme as well as every good one.