BOOK REVIEWS

RELAX

Jane Madders

British Broadcasting Corporation London (1974)

80 pages. Price 65p with accompanying cassette tape (unpriced)

Relaxation has become more and more widely practised since it was first popularized by Jacobsen in the 1930s. Besides its clinical usefulness in psychoprophylaxis for childbirth and in the control of anxiety states, it has gained increasing recognition as a valuable aid in coping with the ordinary stresses of living, thereby lessening the severity and incidence of tension headaches, insomnia, and many other stress symptoms with which patients so often present.

BBC Radio 4's "You and Yours" series on relaxation has now been published as a short paperback with an accompanying cassette. The book, which can be used without the cassette, presents clear instructions for progressive relaxation and describes typical stress symptoms. The habitually tense patient will not only learn much about himself but will be able to discover how to relax in simple stages over four weeks. There is also a chapter on premenstrual tension which may be useful to both spouses.

One limitation is that the material, especially the cassette, aims mainly at an upper middle-class audience. Thus the listener, presumably an executive, is advised to relax during committee meetings, or after an exciting business deal. The steelworker and the shopkeeper would be justified in feeling a little left out. Another, purely physical, drawback was that the review copy fell to pieces after only an hour or two of gentle handling.

Relaxation is effective, and now that this book is available a single trip to the bookshop may well for many patients replace a series of repeat prescriptions for a benzodiazepine. Naturally, however, the same caution applies to the use of relaxation as to the use of tranquillizers: one must be certain that one is not merely suppressing symptoms when it is more appropriate, if more difficult, to deal directly with an underlying cause, such as an unhappy marriage or being in the wrong job.

GALEN IVES

UNDERSTANDING CANCER: A GUIDE FOR THE CARING PROFESSIONS

Ian Burn and Roger L. I. Meyrick (eds)

HMSO, London (1977)

99 pages. Price £2

During the past fortnight I have had the misfortune to see seven new cases of cancer in my practice. Whatever the course that their illnesses might take, the chances are that these patients will spend more time with my district nurse than they will with me. Clearly, she needs to have a full understanding of cancer—of the different forms it may take, the investigations that will be performed, and the treatments that may be used, both physical and psychological.

Although it is aimed at nurses, social workers, and other professionals with no specialist knowledge of the disease, there are few doctors who will not gain from reading this splendid book, which is indispensible reading for all who care for patients with cancer. It is a collection of contributions by 20 eminent authors, and touches on every aspect of the subject, including among others, screening, epidemiology, chemotherapy, and the spiritual needs of the cancer sufferer. Inevitably, a book of only 99 pages is barely going to touch the surface of its subject, but I was astonished at how much detail was included in this one.

One criticism is the total absence of any references. It was frustrating to read of some advance in theory or practice and then have no guide as to where to seek further. Full references are obviously impractical, but I would hope the next edition—and there must be one—would include a list of major review articles.

The book is well laid out, with first rate diagrams and photographs and is let down only by its cover. Surely it was not necessary to present a book that optimistically stresses the advances in cancer therapy in a dingy brown cover with the word "Cancer" in large hazy black letters as if it were the title of a horror film? Nevertheless, I can wholeheartedly recommend this book as being essential for every practice library. You owe it to your staff.

DAVID HASLAM

MEDICAL ENCOUNTERS. THE EXPERIENCE OF ILLNESS AND TREATMENT

Alan Davis and Gordon Horobin (eds)

Croom Helm Limited London (1977)

223 pages. Price £7.95

Medical Encounters is a collection of descriptions by sociologists of their experience of being ill.

The contributors have generally avoided jargon and the account of their difficulties in controlling their doctors reinforces a disquiet which should be universal. Most of the essays describe hospital experiences but references to general practice are important, particularly in the case of two sufferers from migraine and a man who has psoriasis.

One of the remarkable things about the essays is the underlying assumption that the fundamental structures of the NHS are sound. The only aberrant voice is raised by Julius Roth, an American, who is extremely critical and raises questions about freedom of choice of doctor and the fee as a method of control. Surprisingly, the editors largely ignore his challenge in their summing up.

The standard of the contributions is equally balanced and although they are in many ways similar, each has some unique perceptions. Doctors may to some extent fear sociologists, but this book, with the exception of Julius Roth, does not descend to polemic. Paul Atkinson illuminates the hypochondriasis of medical students and led me to speculate that the cure of this state may explain doctors' belief that they are immune from disease.

Perhaps the most stimulating paper is that by Phillip Strong entitled "Medical Errands: a Discussion of Routine Patient Work". He suggests that for many people medical 'errands' are similar to 'errands' in search of tax allowances, driving licences, and washing powders, and perceptively explores the doctor-patient transaction against this background.

This is an interesting and worthwhile publication, which should be read and enjoyed by a wide circle of people including students, general practitioners, and vocational trainees. It should be on most library shelves.

J. S. MCCORMICK