
GENERAL PRACTICE LITERATURE

NEW BOOKS

TEACHING GENERAL PRACTICE

Jack Cormack, Marshall Marinker,
David Morrell (editors)

Kluwer Medical,
Brentford (1981)

328 pages. Price £19.50

General practice possesses, in educational terms, three great advantages over other branches of medicine. One is that there are, comparatively speaking, a great many of us; secondly, we are new to the job (Swift's lecture in the September *Journal*, pages 471–480, showed just how new) and thirdly, since we are generalists and do not see ourselves as holding all the knowledge about our subject, we are perhaps less afraid to turn to others—here, educationists—for help. The very existence of this book is evidence that general practitioners take their teaching seriously, for it aims to cover teaching at all levels, from undergraduate through postgraduate to continuing education.

The book is written by 24 authors, and consists of 47 chapters divided into six parts: principles, methods, content, the search for standards, assessment, and planning for teaching.

The first part, the principles, is written almost entirely by Marinker and is particularly good, although the section on vocational trainees is relatively weak. However, the pick of this section, and for me much the best part of the whole book, is H. J. Wright's single contribution, a chapter entitled "What is to be Taught and Learned?". In only 10 pages, Wright manages that for which Sir George Pickering needed a whole book (*Quest for Excellence in Medical Education*). He discusses the three elements of what is to be learned—knowledge, skills and attitudes—and adds an important fourth, methods of thinking. These methods are often called cognitive skills, but that is a term which always baffles me, not least because the word 'cognitive' never seems to appear in any other context. It is therefore useful to have these skills redefined as observation, deduction, analysis, synthesis, evaluation and communication. Just to see these set out, in scarcely more space than this, is to realize that a huge area is missed out of the declared

medical curriculum. Indeed, qualities such as the evaluation of evidence are actively discouraged by many medical teachers, general practitioners amongst them, for they can lead to uncomfortable encounters with bright young people intolerant of tradition for its own sake. The section on methods contains some excellent chapters, but others—giving a lecture, managing a project, role playing, audio-visual aids, libraries and topic teaching—lack the depth and intellectual challenge that much of the rest of the book affords.

A long section, nearly one third of the book, which covers the content of teaching, seems something of an oddity. Was it really necessary to devote so much space to such well-worn subjects as the doctor-patient relationship, anticipatory care and medicine and society? It is here that the book's debt to its authors' previous work (especially *The Future General Practitioner—Teaching and Learning*) is most apparent; one of the editors is reduced to quoting verbatim a long passage from one of his previous books, and Drury is once again wheeled out to write about practice management, which he does as admirably as ever. The argument about what to teach turns out to be much less interesting than those which enclose it, sandwich-like, on how to teach and how to see if learning has taken place.

Part of the book which can be highly recommended is the section on medical audit, which the author calls "describing ways of teaching general practitioners to learn how to look critically at their own practices and how to look critically at new information . . . training general practitioners to organize their curiosity . . .". Here is much genuinely new material, set out with a gratifying amount of detail and conveying thereby that sense of excitement which research into one's own practice always brings. I have found the chapters by D'Souza on "How to ask the questions" and by Watkins on "Getting down to brass tacks" especially useful in teaching trainees.

In describing assessment procedures, the authors devote most of their space to assessing trainees, partly in the setting of everyday practice (for instance, sampling medical records) and partly in terms of the MRCGP exam. Little new ground is covered here, but the collection of all the examples into one place will be useful to course organizers and general practitioner teachers.

Was there ever a multi-author book

that did not induce the reviewer to call upon the curate's egg? It is always a pleasure to read Marinker on general practice education, even if his ground is familiar, and the collected wisdom of most of the general practice academics of these islands is well worth having. All teachers of general practice will certainly need to own this book, and they will be glad that it is not in the familiar Kluwer loose-leaf format. They will also be pleased to find that, prodigious though the price seems for a 300-page paperback, it represents less than three days of their annual training grant.

The need for such a book as this is summed up in the words of three of the authors. On page 54, Weston and McWhinney write of teaching in the consultation that "it is essential that there is congruence between the teaching of family medicine and the content of the discipline". On page 61, Courtenay, describing the leadership of a small group, says much the same thing: "The leader requires . . . a capacity to blend intellectual and emotional understanding at almost the same time. But, so too does the general practitioner in his work with patients. It needs time . . . but it is not magic and can be learned".

We apologize to the editors and authors for the late appearance of this review.

S. L. BARLEY
Journal Editor

BOOKS FOR PATIENTS

CONQUERING CANCER

Lucien Israel (translated from the French by Joan Pinkham)

Penguin Books
Harmondsworth (1980)

269 pages. Price £2.25

Exactly the kind of book one would expect from this publisher under the Pelican imprint—concise, well written, intelligent, but making notably fewer concessions than most books addressed to the general reader. It is now several years old, having originally appeared in France in 1976, but it was revised in 1980 and can be confidently recommended to readers of above-average understanding.