GENERAL PRACTICE LITERATURE

NEW BOOKS

GENERAL PRACTICE (TUTORIALS IN POSTGRADUATE MEDICINE SERIES)

Eric Gambrill (ed.)

Heinemann Medical Books
London (1982)
364 pages. Price £17.50

"Passive learning from other specialists treating referred patients in hospital is not sufficient for the continuing education of the general practitioner of today and tomorrow." So the sleeve announces the book's agenda, a challenging lapel badge. Each topic and each of the 25 contributors, half of them general practitioners, was chosen personally by Eric Gambrill. How far has each author succeeded in "reviewing current practice and the present state of knowledge, identifying unresolved points and providing a guide to further reading in an important area of family medicine"?

Several chapters are a joy—original, thoughtful, penetrating, undogmatic, well argued and fully referenced—in particular, David Brooks on Urinary Tract Infection, Sylvia Limerick on Cot Death, Douglas Chamberlain on Coronary Heart Disease and Benno Pollack on Alcoholism stand out. The questions for discussion at the end of each chapter are a highly successful innovation. The chapter on Screening by Cyril Hart was refreshingly realistic, and more specific and scrupulous in its hopes after the heady days of 1975's *Screening in General Practice*. The volume is beautifully produced, with a friendly typeface that stimulates the appetite.

But the editor has not fulfilled his task. How could Gillian Strube, on page 1, say that the notion of general practitioners freeing themselves from caring for people with minor ailments in order to manage larger lists and staff casualty and outpatient departments is "uncontroversial"? Her section on Health Education is pitifully referenced; statements like "the studies that have been carried out", "doctors decided that. . ." and "other studies show. . ." must be supported. Anthony Martin's chapter on Cardiovascular Disease in the Elderly informs from on high: his evidence is based on four sources, three of them review articles by himself. We are ordered by Anthony Hicklin in his chapter on Backache: "Send the serious and new cases home to rest in bed for two weeks." Really? Who says it makes any difference in the end? His sentences are littered with imperatives—some even in bold type! These are seven pages of dogma without one single supporting reference. The final sentence commands us: "Never believe everything a single expert tells you." Sound advice at last. Unfortunately, he omitted to discuss the importance of urinary incontinence, saddle numbness or foot-drop in backache.

Feeble, brain-stem observations like "If the patient is a smoker, he should be advised to give it up", in a chapter on diabetes, are a waste of space. Why? What is the evidence that advice helps? It is important to know. To tell the reader to review for himself the evidence for the benefit of good blood sugar control is to duck the author's task.

Yet, a vibrant and optimistic book, conceptually fresh; it contains much more good than bad. It is as near to a definitive statement on intelligent general practice thought, word and deed as anyone has got.

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THE CAUSES OF CANCER

R. Doll and R. Peto

Oxford Medical Publications
Oxford (1982)
63 pages. Price £4.95

For any general practitioner who asks "why him?", "why her?", or even "why me?", £5 is a small sum to pay for this masterly review of the international epidemiological evidence on the causes of cancers. As Richard Doll has pointed out many times before, there is no common site or variety of cancer that is not rare in some part of the world, and no cancer found rarely in one place that is not to be found commonly somewhere else. As there is very little support for the view that these differences are based on racially distributed genetic factors, this must mean that most cancers are ultimately preventable by planned changes in human environment, using the most liberal definition of that term.

The evidence gathered here was prepared for the United States Congress, and some of the calculations are therefore directed to the potential saving of life in America, but this hardly impairs its value for readers in other countries.

I commend this book to every trainer, every trainee, every course organizer and every practising doctor who still retains an interest in why things happen. It is ironic that this monograph should appear just at the time when the United States Government seems determined to ignore the evidence, dismantle the environmental programme of the previous administration and press on with its blind faith that what is good for business is bound to be best for human beings. If it is widely read here, perhaps we can do something to stop things going the same way.

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SMOKING: PSYCHOLOGY AND PHARMACOLOGY

H. Ashton and R. Stepney

Tavistock
London (1982)
222 pages. Price £9.95

This is a welcome and comprehensive review of pharmacological knowledge of a habit common to almost half the adult population and is the most important cause of preventable morbidity and premature death in developed countries. After a succinct history of tobacco-smoking, the book considers scientific aspects. The acetylcholine-like facility of nicotine to influence synaptic neurotransmission is clearly described, and the apparently paradoxical aspects of smoking—its association with heightened arousal on the one hand and with relaxation on the other—is explained by a biphasic excitatory and inhibitory effect on nervous pathways.