
MEDICAL LITERATURE

BOOK REVIEWS

A difficulty for general practitioners is that they are regarded as potential readers of literature covering an extremely wide range of subject-matter. It is intended that this section of the Journal shall henceforth be a forum where those who are faced with the clinical pressure of general practice can appraise new texts. The principles and priorities of our young discipline are being stated with increasing clarity, and it is against the yardsticks of relevance, originality and style that new texts will be judged.

This month, four doctors in a South Glamorgan group practice (D. A. Cadman, P. H. Edwards, G. F. Morgan and J. W. D. Armstrong) have reviewed the first four books listed below.

NIGEL STOTT
Reviews Editor

ENTERING THE WORLD

The De-Medicalization of Childbirth

Michael Odent

Marion Boyars, London (1984)

155 pages. Price £6.95

Those of us tutored in obstetrics while clad in bilious green, surrounded by a cacophony of chat and clanging instruments, tripping over intraspinal drip lines, and with enough light to illuminate a football stadium will find this translation from the French original a refreshing and readable diversion. Unlike most diversions, however, the book does not leave one moving slowly along a mental side-track but promotes the mainline question: 'Are we doing things the right way?'

Part I is a lucid, even poetical, explanation of the philosophy behind the methods. Part II explains the methods derived from the philosophy. There is also a helpful 'glossary for laymen'. The philosophy of Dr Odent (and his mentor, Dr Leboyer) is that, by minimizing the pain and trauma caused by professional interference, noise, instrumentation and bright light, the love and tenderness which should be felt can be

felt. Women and their husbands are taught that 'birthing' is an extreme emotional experience from which spiritual benefit can be gained.

The methods are now well known but it is still interesting to read about them. In Part II of the book Dr Odent pre-empted criticism by citing evidence in favour of his methods.

Conclusion: good value, a good read, but sadly not yet applicable in most NHS hospitals.

D.A.C.

VIDEO IN MENTAL HEALTH PRACTICE

Ira Heilveil

Tavistock Publications, London (1984)

209 pages. Price £4.95 (paperback)

This handbook shows how a technological advance allows consultations, therapy and group activities to be recorded and provide useful feedback. The applications of video to mental health practice range from the interesting to the bizarre.

Heilveil lays down sensible guidelines for use of video recordings while supervising students; he suggests that video should be used as an intermittent aid to highlight nonverbal behaviour between students and patient. The fact that a tape can be viewed repeatedly is an asset during the technique of desensitization, and in the area of phobias it bypasses the necessity of providing exotic stimuli such as live snakes. The author also proposes a novel technique for confronting the alcoholic: viewing one's drunken state while sober is a truth that cannot be denied—the camera never lies.

The main thrust of the book deals, however, with psychotherapeutic techniques—the relationship between the therapist and the client. In this context video appears to increase the time devoted to therapy exponentially: the 'standard hour' must be doubled if the tape is to be reviewed. This is unrealistic for general practitioners, who usually provide feedback to their patients via a 'flash' technique during the five to 10 minute appointment. Nor do I believe that Heilveil shows that detailed examination and re-examination of the minutiae of the consultation is of great

benefit—the camera as a co-therapist may be novel, but many readers will remain sceptical.

The final section of the book looks to the future. The techniques described—split screens, multi- and superimposed images—provide examples of psychotherapeutic hyperbole rather than being immediately applicable to general practice in the UK.

P.H.E.

ATLAS OF EMERGENCY MEDICINE (2nd edition)

Peter Rosen and George L. Sternbach

Williams and Wilkins, London (1984)

234 pages. Price £80.00 (approx)

This is a beautifully produced, readable book, aimed at the emergency room physician in the USA. The authors describe their own approach to practical emergency procedures without reference to any conflicting opinions.

The text is divided into 11 sections. One section deals with cardiopulmonary resuscitation, while the others deal with a single physiological system. Each section has a concise introduction outlining the indications for the procedures described. The descriptions of the techniques are accompanied by clear, high quality line-drawings on the facing pages. The figure illustrating laryngoscopy prior to endotracheal intubation with the tongue on the wrong side of the mouth is the only minor error I noticed. The British casualty officer, military surgeon or general practitioner involved in immediate care may find the section on the thorax somewhat daunting, with its description of open-chest cardiac massage and aortic cross-clamping, but many other more common life-saving emergency procedures are well illustrated.

Throughout the text there are helpful tips, such as a nonreturn valve for pneumothorax drainage made from the finger of a surgical glove and that a nasogastric tube kept in a refrigerator is easier to pass than one kept at room temperature.

I was surprised to find no mention of the oesophageal obturator airway which has found a place in emergency care in

the USA. There is also no mention of external defibrillation in cardiac arrest, though internal defibrillation and emergency transvenous pacing are described.

In summary, this is a clear, concise and comprehensive exposition of emergency procedures, which I would strongly recommend to all doctors involved with emergency medicine and perhaps more should keep their less-used skills up to date.

J.W.D.A.

CONTROLLED DRINKING

Nick Heather and Ian Robertson

Methuen, London (1983)

318 pages. Price £6.95

Two psychologists from Dundee have produced a paperback edition of their 1981 text.

They reviewed the substantial literature up to 1980, which shows that a

proportion of alcoholics can resume controlled drinking after a period of abstinence. The book is written primarily for psychologists, but it is of importance to all workers in the alcoholic field, including general practitioners. The authors assert that their review of the literature is sufficiently comprehensive to obviate the need for further reviews—a brave claim in a paper world, but an indication of how thorough the authors have tried to be.

The book challenges the belief that alcoholics have a biogenetic defect which makes them react differently to alcohol, or that they undergo a permanent physiological change as a result of chronic ingestion of alcohol. The authors maintain that the traditional concepts are based on 'folk wisdom' rather than research, and they ask the reader to think again in the light of their evidence.

The bulk of the book is concerned with the presentation of theory and research into the concept of controlled drinking. For the average general practitioner there is too much psychological theory, but summaries at the end of

chapters prove useful. Many of the points raised are noteworthy. For example, the concept of controlled drinking may seem a more realistic goal for an alcoholic seeking treatment than the distant vision of total abstinence, and it is suggested that environmental factors may be more important than psychological ones in determining the alcoholic's behaviour.

The book is unlikely to become essential practice reading but the ideas it puts forward must be given consideration by a professional group who are often criticized for failing to identify drinking problems early enough in their patients. Furthermore, the innovations proposed in the book should provide practitioners with hope for more benefits from therapy or referral than has been experienced in the past. Those with a special interest in alcoholism should read this book, and I hope that the essence of its message will filter into postgraduate education.

G.F.M.

PREScribing— A SUITABLE CASE FOR TREATMENT

Occasional Paper 24

General practitioner prescribing continues to attract attention, both in relation to quality and to costs. Quality concerns safety, relevance and effectiveness, while the cost of the average general practitioner's prescriptions now exceeds the cost of his income and expenses combined.

Prescribing—A Suitable Case for Treatment reports a study which examined both these factors. The computerized technology of the Prescription Pricing Authority was used to analyse the prescriptions of a study group and compare them with those of matched controls and this was backed up by an educational programme involving discussions between members of the study group. The results suggest that with this kind of encouragement practitioners could reduce both the level and the cost of their prescribing.

Prescribing—A Suitable Case for Treatment, Occasional Paper 24, is available now, price £3.75, including postage, from the Royal College of General Practitioners, Publications Sales Department, 8 Queen Street, Edinburgh EH2 1JE. Payment should be made with order.

SOCIAL CLASS AND HEALTH STATUS: INEQUALITY OR DIFFERENCE

Occasional Paper 25

It has been known for many years that social class is a major determinant of health and death. What is not clear is how general practitioners respond to illness presented by patients in different social classes. Although the Black Report was unconvinced about differential response, Dr Donald Crombie in his important McConaghey Memorial Lecture provides new evidence that general practitioners actively compensate by providing more consultations and more care for patients in social classes 4 and 5.

This lecture gives the factual evidence and also provides striking tables showing that the variations of care between general practitioners is now greater than variation due to any obvious patient factor, including age, sex and social class; in other words the doctor is the most important variable in general medical practice.

Occasional Paper 25 can be obtained from the Publications Sales Office, Royal College of General Practitioners, 8 Queen Street, Edinburgh EH2 1JE, price £3.50, including postage. Payment should be made with order.