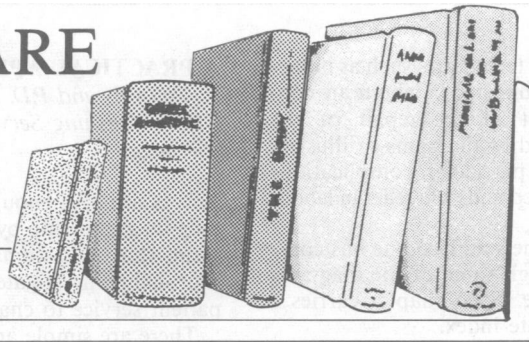


PRIMARY CARE BOOK SHELF



AMERICA'S HEALTH IN THE BALANCE: CHOICE OR CHANCE?

Howard H. Hiatt

Harper and Row, New York (1987)
252 pages. Price \$18.95

As the introduction to this book states, the USA should be the healthiest country in the world: it spends more per capita on medical care, has greater technological resources and has more doctors than almost any other nation, yet ranks seventeenth worldwide in infant mortality and sixteenth in life expectancy. Dr Hiatt's analysis of America's health care problems results in a remarkable book which is scholarly but practical, written in a straightforward and individual way. Although the emphasis is on dilemmas associated with private medical care, the author identifies problems which affect all health care systems and there are comparisons with other countries, including the UK.

Using case studies and anecdotes, the first part of the book analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the health care system in America: the problems of spiralling costs which lead to rationing of care, the lack of gatekeepers to help patients obtain access to care and the double-edged sword of advances in medical technology. It goes on to examine the lessons to be learnt from health care in Britain, Canada and third world countries. In the third section Dr Hiatt puts forward proposals for increasing the health benefits from the current resources: better prevention, more basic research, better assessment of technology, and more health services research. The author ends with his list of highest priorities for change, which include health insurance and a system of primary care for all Americans, community care programmes for the poor, elderly and mentally handicapped and more extensive programmes of prevention. It is hardly surprising to learn that Dr Hiatt acknowledges that the seeds of his thesis were sown during a one year visit to Britain.

This may sound like a dry subject, but the author's style transforms it into a fascinating account of an important subject and the book is a pleasure to read.

E. GRAHAM BUCKLEY
Editor of the Journal

WHERE TO BE BORN

The debate and the evidence

Rona Campbell and Alison Macfarlane

National Perinatal Mortality Unit, Oxford (1987)
72 pages. Price £2.00

This is an excellent and well-balanced book on a topical subject that has received very little objective attention.

It begins with a comprehensive historical review spanning two centuries. The authors point out that although after the Second World War the initial demand for hospitalization came from mothers and was discouraged by health officials, doctors were quick to echo this demand as soon as the falling birth rate threatened their jobs.

The central section, comparing home and hospital births,

tackles the complex problem of distinguishing between cause, correlation and coincidence in an unbiased fashion. Even if the result is so often 'not proven', this is preferable to false certainty. Shorter sections follow on general practice units and infant morbidity. These, and the role of midwives, are the areas where research is most needed, as the authors recognize in the conclusion.

The concluding section demonstrates that the debate about place of birth is not yet settled, and that past policy changes have often been based on expediency or untested assumptions. It will also show the general practitioner, who may have resigned himself to a diminishing role in obstetrics, that he still has a valuable part to play.

DAPHNE RUSSELL
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OBSTETRICS AND GYNAECOLOGY IN GENERAL PRACTICE

John Eddy and John Owen

Churchill Livingstone, Edinburgh (1987)
415 pages. Price £19.95

There seems to have been a surfeit of books on this subject in recent years. This is the twelfth book in the *Library of general practice* series and is the work of two authors, a general practitioner obstetrician and a consultant gynaecologist. It is perhaps unfortunate that the publishers commissioned a treatise on two major specialties one small volume and, not unexpectedly, the result is something of a curate's egg.

However, the section on gynaecology is excellent, presented in a logical, concise and competent manner. The chapters on infertility and therapeutic abortion are particularly lucid and that on sterilization helpful, although perhaps not every lady in the land would be flattered by the statement that '... most European women, being obese, find it [laparoscopic tubal occlusion] an uncomfortable procedure'. Contraception is also dealt with comprehensively in 30 pages, a minor irritation being the collective use of the word 'coils' for all the different types of intrauterine contraceptive devices.

The half of the book devoted to obstetrics is rather disappointing. In the introduction, the authors point out that, while most general practitioners are concerned with the provision of antenatal and postnatal care, as few as 10% are now responsible for deliveries and, perhaps as a result, a rather lukewarm case is made for practical general practice obstetrics. Nevertheless, the principal activity of antenatal care, including selection of patients, is dismissed in six pages. On the other hand, the chapter on special investigations (monitoring the fetus in pregnancy) is comprehensive and profusely illustrated and complications of pregnancy and medical diseases are well covered too. The chapter, 'The fetus at risk', is a rather strange section covering topics such as infectious diseases, alcohol in pregnancy, malpresentation and the diagnosis of cephalopelvic disproportion. Normal labour is dealt with in a somewhat cursory