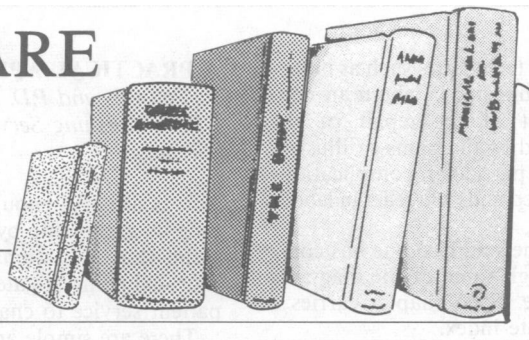


PRIMARY CARE BOOK SHELF



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.

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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

manner, although current interventional techniques such as induction, active management and fetal monitoring in labour are conventionally presented. The account of the repair of the episiotomy could have been enhanced by diagrams or illustrations. Emergencies in labour, and, in particular, complications of the third stage, are scarcely mentioned and pain relief in labour is not addressed at all.

Overall, the book is produced to the standard one has come to expect from its publishers, although some of the diagrams and bar charts look rather primitive. Each chapter carries a reference list and there is an adequate index.

M.J.V. BULL

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CASE PRESENTATIONS IN CLINICAL GERIATRIC MEDICINE

G.S. Rai, P.J. Murphy and G. Wright
Butterworths, Kent (1987)
136 pages. Price £7.95

This little book contains 60 case presentations with questions and detailed assessments and comments. It is crammed with facts about the medical care of the elderly and some of the information is useful, important and well-referenced. However, the text has been designed for those studying for the relevant diploma and membership examinations. As long as we rely on examinations, there will be a demand, perhaps even a justification, for books like this. Like all similar texts, it has a tendency to concentrate on disease processes and diagnosis with little of the wider personal and social context of ill health. No doubt those sitting higher examinations which cover geriatrics will find some useful facts and security in this book; those requiring a proper grounding in the subject will need to look elsewhere.

CHARLES B. FREER

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TEXTBOOK OF MEDICAL RECORD LINKAGE

J.A. Baldwin, E.D. Acheson and W.J. Graham (Eds)
Oxford University Press (1987)
347 pages. Price £37.50

It must be a mark of success that record linkage is now a reality to such an extent that it is taken for granted. This book is therefore an appropriate tribute to the late John Baldwin and other pioneers in this field whose basic technological achievements are described in the first section of the book.

Various contributors then present an inspiring wealth of examples of the epidemiological and management potential of record linkage. In the final section there is a valuable chapter by Professor Charles Florey on the ethical implications of record linkage and the topical aspects of confidentiality which control and limit the application of technology. These are of major concern to general practitioners and their patients, given the inevitable repercussions on the doctor-patient relationship of the growth in team access to patient information.

However, the general practitioner reader is left to work out for himself how record linkage techniques can be applied in primary care: for example, long-term follow up, shared care, preventive programmes and quality control. Many general practitioners now have appropriate data recording systems and the computer expertise to do this. For them, this would be an extremely useful book to find on the shelves in their postgraduate centres.

MURIEL BERKELEY

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A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO ASTHMA

R. Pauwels and P.D. Snashall
CBA Publishing Services, Dorking (1986)
167 pages.

This is a useful enough monograph on asthma, notwithstanding its authorship by two hospital specialists with its implicit claim that all asthmatics should be seen by specialists and thoroughly investigated — claims which would reduce the out-patient service to chaos if implemented.

There are simple and easy résumés on the pathophysiology of asthma for those who have long since forgotten such details, and the role of allergy and bronchial hyper-responsiveness is well explained. It is correctly emphasized that asthma is under-diagnosed, that the peak flow meter is as vital to the management of asthma as the sphygmomanometer is to hypertension, and that meters should be lent to patients as a diagnostic, educational and therapeutic exercise. Other respiratory function tests are less relevant to general practice and make tedious reading for the non-physiologist.

The book is sound on therapeutics and discusses each drug group succinctly, promotes the fearless use of short sharp courses of steroids, gives practical advice on the use of inhalers, spacers and extension tubes, and warns about the tragic consequences of over-reliance on nebulizers. The authors maintain that early and energetic treatment of even mild asthma can prevent the onset of irreversible airways obstruction.

The main weakness in this book is the authors' reluctance to involve the general practitioner in diagnosis and education, and his relegation to the role of merely monitoring asthma. They even claim that voluntary asthma societies have more of an educational and supportive role than the general practitioner. This is perhaps predictable in a work where several pages are devoted to the importance of IgE and prostaglandins in asthma, and where the first mention of advice to stop smoking is on page 159.

CHARLES DALY

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UNDERSTANDING SENILE DEMENTIA

A.F. Jorm
Croom Helm, London (1987)
158 pages. Price £17.95 h/b, £8.95 p/b

The author of *Understanding senile dementia* tells us that it is aimed at practitioners and students in medicine and nursing, health administrators, social workers, medical psychologists, occupational therapists and lay people. Inevitably the author fails to satisfy the disparate needs of these groups.

The book cannot be recommended to doctors, although it might be useful to a medical student approaching the subject for the first time and looking for a relatively superficial introduction to dementia. An example of the book's lack of balance is the two and a half pages devoted to the link between Alzheimer's disease and Down's syndrome, while more important factors in the aetiology of dementia such as space-occupying lesions, uraemia and anoxia go unmentioned. Also, while old age is quoted as the most important risk factor in Alzheimer's disease, no mention is made of the increased risk for relatives if the disease has started before the age of 65 years. The redeeming features of the book are interesting chapters on the assessment and management of dementia and a good bibliography.

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