



PREVENTING MENTAL ILLNESS

Jennifer Newton

Routledge and Kegan Paul, London (1988)

275 pages. Price £25.00

In his foreword Colin Murray Parkes hopes that this book 'may deter impatient fools from rushing in with half-baked schemes'. This is salutary advice at a time when preventive medicine is the flavour of the month.

Jennifer Newton makes the case for one professional group having primary responsibility for developing preventive health approaches and identifies general practitioners as having this role in the area of mental illness. She selects key research studies from the substantial literature which have been particularly influential in the development of a framework for preventing mental illness. She uses schizophrenia and depression to illustrate her theme and it is the latter than general practitioners and allied professionals will find most interesting, if only to confirm that the greatest need for action lies in those practices serving the most disadvantaged populations.

Complementing as it does the College's publications on prevention, this is a very good book indeed.

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TEXTBOOK OF GENERAL MEDICINE AND PRIMARY CARE

John Noble (Ed)

Little, Brown and Company, Boston (1987)

2376 pages. Price £79.50

In the preface the editor of this American book writes that 'The clinical presentation and management of illness and medical problems of primary care as it is actually practiced has served as the major focus for this text'. To that end approximately 200 contributors have produced a reference work of nearly 2500 pages.

It is divided into four sections. The first is called 'The primary care patient' and contains a mishmash of topics such as communication, ethics, the law, occupational and environmental health, and decision analysis. The second section, 'Emergencies', ranges from musculoskeletal injuries to radiation exposure and pesticide poisoning. By far the longest is the third section, 'General medicine and primary care', which is subdivided into conventional specialties, for example dermatology, ophthalmology, neurology and so on. The last section, 'Management of special patients', provides an 'integrated holistic approach' to the care of certain categories of patients, for example the adolescent, the retarded, the raped and battered, and the malnourished patient.

While this book can be approached along the traditional lines for a reference text, for indepth reading of a subject of personal interest or for preparing a topic for teaching, it also provides a highly relevant commentary on some of the problems that are facing British general practice today. For example, the chapter entitled 'Periodic health examination of the adult' discusses why the annual comprehensive examination for well people is no longer supported in the United States. Some of the reasons cited for this shift in opinion include the harm that can be done, for example by complications of invasive procedures done in response to false positive screening tests, the misleading impression that good health is assured and the lack of data to support many of the components of the examination. Can we not learn from their experience? It would be ridiculous if our health service were to re-enact the very mistakes the Americans now realize they have made.

Despite the obvious differences in the way in which the provision of medical care is organized we could learn a lot from our transatlantic colleagues.

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RESHAPING THE NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

Robert Maxwell (Ed)

Policy Journals, The Old Vicarage, Newbury, Berkshire (1988)

199 pages. Price £25.00

Everyone has an opinion about what has been happening recently in the National Health Service, but few of us are well informed. This book is a collection of papers describing the changes which have taken place since the Conservative government took office in 1979. The authors discuss the extent to which such changes have been innovative or merely continuations of existing trends. The introduction of general management and the efforts made in the search for efficiency and value for money, including performance indicators, contracting out, supplies purchasing and estate management are all well covered. The impact of government policies on doctors, nurses and ancillary staff is discussed, together with the varying fortunes of consumer representation. David Taylor argues that family practitioner committees should be strengthened and competition encouraged between primary care providers. However, the basis for these conclusions, unlike those in other chapters, is abstruse.

It is heartening to see emphasis being given to the need for outcome measures and for data to be collected which is suitable for its purpose rather than simply available. Perhaps the need for expertise in data interpretation will be recognized next.

This book is very readable and I doubt there are many who would not learn something of interest from it. My one disap-