

eventual response rate of 78% among the elderly people was reasonable. However, the response from the general practitioners was poor, only 39%.

Some of the results were perhaps predictable — three fifths of the elderly people regarded their health as excellent or good, one third took no medicines, most understood something about the medicines they were taking and the majority took them as advised. Among the general practitioners there were concerns about labelling, effective instructions, record keeping and supervision. As the authors admit, it is difficult to make statements about these aspects because of the low response rate but the concerns are undoubtedly relevant. The book's specific recommendations for record keeping, the role of the pharmacist, better communication and education are sensible and should be heeded.

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### NEW PROSPECTS FOR MEDICINE

*Jonathan M. Austyn*

*Oxford University Press (1988)*

*126 pages. Price £12.50*

Recent advances in molecular biology and genetics and their implications for clinical medicine form the main theme of this interesting book. The opening chapter traces the evolution of technical changes in diagnostic medicine since the last war, and comments on the potential loss of good personal doctoring and the problem of rationing of health resources. The author relates molecular and genetic advances to cancer research and treatment. Next, the new genetics is made understandable to the non-expert in the field and its application in the diagnosis and treatment of inherited diseases, especially in prenatal diagnosis, provides fascinating reading. A separate chapter explores the underlying ethical issues and discusses the medical presumption in favour of life. Immunological problems which arise from tissue transplantation in humans are clearly defined, but not the ethical implications. There is a thought-provoking chapter on the publication of new information in medical journals and of the need to raise standards of authorship and reduce the numbers of publications.

The concluding chapter reviews progress in medicine over many years and considers changes in the future, and the need to balance good personal doctoring with a greater emphasis on scientific medicine. This book would be of general interest to all doctors, because it provides an expert overview of the scientific changes in medicine in the past half century and the prospects for the future.

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### BANKING ON SICKNESS

**Commercial medicine in Britain and the USA**

*Ben Griffith, Steve Iliffe and Geof Rayner*

*Lawrence and Wishart, London (1987)*

*287 pages. Price £6.95*

This book on private medicine is written by a member of a health authority, a health liaison officer in local government and a general practitioner, all from London. Each chapter in the book is attributed to one of the three authors and reveals the differences in their writing styles and politics.

The book is divided into three parts. The first reviews the history of commercial medicine in Britain from before the Na-

tional Health Service (NHS) to the changes taking place in recent years under the present government. The second part traces the development of the NHS as an historic compromise and the third looks at the meaning of commercial medicine from the point of view of a medical market place. The book ends with a defence of the NHS with suggestions as to how to tackle the growth of commercial medicine.

This is a well referenced book with a great deal of relevant information, but it is a pity that at least some of the discussion is conducted in the language of left wing versus right wing confrontation. The terms commercial medicine and private medicine are used interchangeably which is unfortunate because there is a difference between charitable institutions and commercial ventures for profit.

However, the authors do draw the threads together with a reasonably balanced defence of the NHS and some sensible suggestions, such as linking merit awards to consultants who are committed full-time to the health service. The danger is not that people are allowed the freedom to choose private care from charitable institutions in addition to the NHS, but that the growth of commercial medicine on the American model will precipitate a two-tier service. The NHS is a compromise which depends on balance and this is not helped by the political bias displayed at times by the authors. But they do highlight the dangers of the growing encroachment of commercial medicine in this country.

It has been said that the NHS is the tribute an unequal society pays to social justice. As such it may be one of the greatest contributions which this country has made to civilization. This book is a timely reminder of the dangers which that achievement faces both from commercial pressures and ideological rhetoric.

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### EVERYONE A PRIVATE PATIENT

**An analysis of the structural flaws in the NHS and how they could be remedied**

*David Green*

*Institute of Economic Affairs, London (1988)*

*92 pages. Price £7.50*

This book presents a detailed economic argument in favour of insurance-based funding of health care in the UK, rejecting the present system of funding through taxation because it creates a monopoly of provision, denies accountability by professionals to funders and consumers, and leads to inefficiency.

The experience of the USA and Europe in regulating the cost-effectiveness of insurance-based health care, supports arguments for the radical restructuring of the National Health Service, with vouchers exchangeable for private health insurance (for hospital care only, or for primary care as well). The value of vouchers would be related to age, and there would be rules to protect the 'high risk' individual from being excluded from health insurance. The problem of those unable to pay more than the value of the voucher is acknowledged to be a responsibility of government, as is the care of the mentally ill, the handicapped and the elderly.

These are not original proposals, but this synthesis into a package of reform is a helpful contribution to the contemporary debate which may govern our professional futures. For this reason I can recommend this book, as a glimpse of what our present political rulers may be planning.

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