



RESEARCH IN GENERAL PRACTICE (2nd edition)

John Howie

Chapman and Hall, London (1989)

320 pages. Price £11.95

When meeting an old friend who has undergone a face-lift it is reassuring to find that his or her essential character remains unchanged. So it is with this book, a friend to many since the first edition in 1979. The new edition retains all the solid virtues which have made it unrivalled as a working guide to research in general practice. The emphasis remains firmly at the practical level: thinking about; doing; looking at; and describing research form the major divisions of the book. Each section is illustrated by examples of research from the author's immediate experience.

Apart from three entirely new chapters there are three principal areas that have been updated: the technology of research from literature review to data analysis has developed rapidly in a decade; the social sciences have contributed new methods of data gathering; and, clearly, the scope of research in general practice has widened considerably.

Aside from renewing a valued friendship I gained most from the second of two new closing chapters. This explores the evolution of a broadly based idea — Is stress on the doctor a major determinant of the quality of care he delivers? — into a number of research questions. This process is fascinating to the academic general practitioner because it reveals two important areas of our involvement with research: explicitly, advice to less experienced colleagues, whose initial ideas are similarly unfocused; and implicitly, the vexed question of departmental research priorities. For while I accept that 'research in general practice is now an inter-disciplinary field and that teamwork and sharing point the way ahead' I suspect that most clinicians remain fixated on research which addresses service priorities; in a multidisciplinary department true teamwork must involve negotiating the research questions not just the methodological answers.

I M STANLEY

Professor of general practice, University of Liverpool

FAMILY PROBLEMS

Oxford general practice series no 17

Peter R Williams

Oxford University Press (1989)

108 pages. Price £12.50

By gradually adopting the patient-centred approach, many doctors feel they have been making satisfactory progress. But according to Peter Williams, it is not sufficient to be focussing on people as individuals. It appears that most general practitioners are not aware that the experience of illness and the threat of bereavement can lead to distress within families. Helping affected families and preventing others from becoming affected is put forward as an important general practice responsibility,

and represents the justification for this book which is intended also for students and trainees and members of primary health care teams.

Conditions attributable to stress in families are said to include such things as schizophrenia, depression, psychosomatic illness, alcoholism, anorexia nervosa and streptococcal infection. And useful pointers to the recognition of family problems include vague symptoms, frequent consultations about minor matters, addiction, and loss of control in chronic illnesses such as diabetes and epilepsy.

The interesting techniques described are adopted from family and marital therapists, but are intended for family problems — not problem families. The aims are to promote better communication within families, to bring about understanding of what is happening; and to discuss the rules governing family behaviour, to help change them. It is urged that the whole family should be worked with, in a large enough room; and that half-a-dozen uninterrupted 40-minute sessions, at fortnightly intervals should be set aside.

This is a very impressive account of an important subject. But perhaps being a family doctor does not necessarily mean dealing with the whole family altogether; rather, aiming to be seen as a member of that family.

JACK NORELL

General practitioner, London, and president, International Balint Federation

HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY

An introduction for nurses and other health care professionals

Neil Niven

Churchill Livingstone, Edinburgh (1989)

380 pages. Price £8.95

Health psychology is a new subject, being the study of normal human behaviour, with the emphasis not on illness or treatment, but on health. It is concerned with the stresses and strains of everyday life, on communication with patients, and seeks to understand why some individuals comply with medical advice and some do not.

This book is divided into three main sections: process, content and models. I found the section on content particularly interesting with its examination of the psychobiological perspective, highlighting the relationship between life events and the aetiology of mental and physical disorders. Among many issues examined by the author are the cultural interpretations of physical and psychological stress and the important question as to whether theories of health behaviour — developed in the West — are in fact applicable to people throughout the world.

My criticism of the book is that by the end I was left feeling unsure as to whom it was really aimed at.

Certainly there are sections that are very pertinent for doctors, nurses, psychologists and health educators but I wonder if the author has been slightly overambitious in attempting to