



## 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

reach too wide an audience in one book. I would also have liked to have read more about the family context and dynamics and the way in which these relate to an individual's perception of health.

These criticisms are, however, fairly minor and overall I found this comprehensive book highly readable and well laid out together with being interesting and thought provoking. It certainly deserves to be read not only by nurses but by those studying medicine at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and perhaps particularly by those of us involved in general practice.

ANGUS HOPPE  
*General practitioner, Edinburgh*

**RESEARCH METHODS IN PSYCHIATRY:**

**A beginner's guide**  
*Chris Freeman and Peter Tyrer (eds)*  
*The Royal College of Psychiatrists, London (1989)*  
240 pages. Price £10.00

Not every doctor will become a dedicated researcher but an understanding of research principles and methods is essential for effective critical enquiry or performance review and thus for improved patient care. Like their psychiatrist colleagues, general practitioner trainees increasingly accept the link between individual research and better clinical practice. Chris Freeman and Peter Tyrer have drawn on their experience of running research methodology courses to assemble a beginner's guide which succeeds admirably in its aims. Though primarily intended for trainee psychiatrists, there is much that is common to research work in any scientific discipline and much that is of interest to general practitioners.

Besides the standard topics covered in the introduction, the authors give advice on 'getting supervision' and 'keeping a research diary' and counsel on 'coping with failure and how to prevent it'. They amuse by examining the motivation for carrying out research and give a range of predicted success probabilities, from 'keeping a critical attitude' ( $P=0.75$ ) to 'fame, prestige and glory' ( $P=0.0001$ ). There is a useful checklist of the functions of a statistical coordinator but some duplication of advice on preparing a protocol. For general practitioners the three chapters on rating scales may seem overlong but many will be intrigued by the chapter on research with single (or few) patients.

This pocket-sized book is concise and readable with clear and sometimes humorous diagrams and illustrations lightening the reading load. There are extensive references, an extended reading list, a short but helpful glossary and a workmanlike index. Throughout, there is the reassuring feel of authors with 'hands on' experience of their subject which will ensure a favoured place on my bookshelf for this book.

ALASTAIR F WRIGHT  
*General practitioner, Glenrothes, Fife*

**FOLLIES AND FALLACIES IN MEDICINE**

*Petr Skrabanek and James McCormick*  
*Tarragon Press, Glasgow (1989)*  
170 pages. Price £7.95

A delightful book, fresh and direct in its writing, *Follies and fallacies in medicine* attacks with relish the icons of contemporary medicine.

After first considering the power of the placebo, there are chapters on the fallacies which result from a poor understanding of scientific methods, pitfalls in diagnosis and labelling, risks entailed in prevention and the lack of evidence for fashionable alternative medicine. There is also a short chapter on the differences between science and medicine.

The book is wide ranging and many aspects of current medical practice come under the searchlight of these self-acknowledged sceptics. Their aim is to attack the uncritical acceptance of existing medical practice which they see as an impediment to progress. There is a paradox at the heart of clinical medicine — as clinicians, doctors are aware of the benefits to patients of displaying therapeutic confidence while, as scientists, they need to be aware of the uncertainties which exist in most of clinical medicine.

This book should be read not only by general practitioners but by all doctors and medical students. The authors are well known for their questioning of the morality and practicality of health promotion and their views on this are well covered in the chapter on prevention. The other chapters are equally stimulating and unlike most medical tests, the style is sharp and witty. Catholic in its use of source material, non-conformist in its approach, the book is a pleasure to read.

GRAHAM BUCKLEY  
*General practitioner, Livingston, West Lothian*

**CLASSIFIED ADVERTISEMENTS**

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW  
DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL PRACTICE

**TWO PART-TIME  
RESEARCH LECTURESHIPS**

Applications are invited from registered medical practitioners for two part-time research lectureships funded by General Accident p.l.c. The lectureships are tenable for a period of four years from 1st August 1990 and are intended to give preserved time for research towards a doctorate level. Applicants should be in general practice and would normally be expected to be in possession of the MRCGP qualification. The salary will be within the University Lecturer scale (currently £14,545 - £17,635 on a full-time basis).

Further particulars can be obtained from Professor J.H. Barber, Department of General Practice, Woodside Health Centre, Barr Street, Glasgow G20 7LR with whom applications together with the names of two referees should be lodged by 31st March, 1990.

THE MACMILLAN EDUCATION CENTRE  
of The Dorothy House Foundation  
offers

**"TAKING THE LID OFF"**

A short Workshop for G.P.s interested in developing skills in the physical and psychological care of dying patients.

Dates: 27.6.90 - 29.6.90 Cost: £50.00  
and

Dates: 3.9.90 - 5.9.90 (Residential) Cost: £95 (inclusive)

For further information, please contact:-

Jill Griffiths, Education Secretary,  
The Macmillan Education Centre,  
164 Bloomfield Road,  
Bath BA2 2AT  
Tel: 0225 445545