

running anxiety management groups should further reduce the prescribing of sedatives and tranquillizers.

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A TEXTBOOK OF FAMILY MEDICINE

Ian R McWhinney

Oxford University Press (1989)

380 pages. Price £40.00

Ian McWhinney's first book *An introduction to family medicine* has long been the bench mark for books about general practice or family medicine. *A textbook of family medicine* expands and updates this material and could be taken as the definitive description of the discipline of general practice. The 10 chapters in the first part 'Basic principles' are the most rigorous description of the underlying philosophy, scientific discipline, and practical application yet published. They constitute the 'grounded theory' of our discipline and could and should be used to refute the arguments, explicit or implicit, used by the medical educational establishment to denigrate and marginalize general practice. Indeed, most specialties would do well to be able to marshal an equally formidable statement of basic principles.

Because of the weight of argument, this book is not easy reading. In particular the chapter on clinical method with its mathematical approach to diagnostic certainty, might seem a long way away from the diagnoses and decisions that have to be made in a Monday morning surgery. However, this should go far to relieving the chronic inferiority complex of general practitioners who often denigrate their own quite rigorous problem solving approach by saying that they 'cut corners'. McWhinney

has validated the thinking general practitioner's approach to diagnosis and decision making.

Interestingly in his introduction McWhinney says that he started to write a second edition of *An introduction to family medicine* but it required so much change that he decided to give it a new title and he says that 'calling it *The essentials of family medicine* also reflected my feeling that the book was no longer an introduction to the subject'. One has to ask why then it is entitled *A textbook of family medicine*, and indeed, herein lies its weakness. A textbook is by definition a reference book to which one goes for the definitive description of phenomena and their management. One does not read a textbook from cover to cover. Equally, a textbook is expected to give equal weight to every subject within its remit. This is not a textbook and it should be read through. The chapters on clinical problems are, as McWhinney points out, chosen to show the application of the principles enunciated in the first part, but they are neither definitive in their range nor in the depth to which each topic is covered. The three problems presented are sore throat, headache and fatigue. Dizziness, weight loss, and menstrual irregularity have been less written about and would have been equally good carriers for the basic principles. Similarly the two diseases described, diabetes and hypertension, must be two of the most written about conditions dealt with in general practice and it would have been refreshing to have the principles applied to the less well defined problems of arthritis, chronic lung disease and peptic ulceration.

Nevertheless this book is required reading for any general practitioner, whether at the beginning of his or her career or well established, who wants to think about what he or she is doing. It is lucid, logical and penetrating. It is food for thought but also comfort for those who feel themselves out-gunned by the exponents of the quick technological fix.

DAVID METCALFE

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