

THE QUALITY OF LIFE**The missing measurement in health care**

Leslie Fallowfield

Souvenir Press, London (1990)

234 pages. Price £12.95 (h/b), £7.95 (p/b)

Consider the example of a man who is housebound with angina and who gets chest pain when he does anything. Using a questionnaire he would be termed to have a 'well state' of 0.5549. His primary symptom, chest pain, would require an adjustment of -0.0382 , but the restricted diet and effective drugs he was taking would mean another adjustment of $+0.1124$. Hence this man's quality of well being would be 0.6291. Health economists would deem him as functioning at a level of 60% between death and total wellness. If, however, he stayed in this state of health for a year he would be deemed to have lost 0.3709 of a well year or 37% a year. If he survived for the next two or three years health economists would judge him to be in a state worse than death.

Despite this bizarre conclusion the author of this book feels that we need sensible quality of life assessments to help us identify those in need of extra support and to evaluate the efficacy of new treatments. She says some clinicians only pay lip service to the concept of quality of life and need to be more

honest with themselves and their patients about the true benefits of certain treatments.

There is a permanent tension between awful diseases and awful treatments. Many of our patients and their families are willing to take great chances in attempts at palliation or cure. The most popular clinicians are often personable, positive and strong believers in their craft. When disease is the winner, there is an anger that is directed at medicine but absolves the physician. Books like *The quality of life* are part of this anger at medicine which sends confusing messages to clinicians. Should we go for the magician approach or calmly and unemotionally weigh up the pros and cons when faced with patients who expect relief of pain or promise of a cure and hand the final decision over to the patient? Those who expect perfection, solutions, dignity and absence of pain, will always be disappointed.

This book does have good accounts of existing measurements of quality of life but for general practitioners such measurements never ring true. They are at worst destructive or at best offer uncritical exhortation to do better without in any way helping us to make the system in which we work less brutal for ourselves or our patients.

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