

DYSTHYMIC DISORDER

S W Burton and H S Akiskal (eds)
Royal College of Psychiatrists, London (1990)
 144 pages. Price £7.50

A prime requirement for systematic exploration of any disorder is that it can be reliably diagnosed. Recent advances in psychiatry have been associated with the development of categorization systems for psychiatric diagnoses based on operational definitions. One of the most important is the *Diagnostic and statistical manual for mental disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), now DSM III R. Its application has revealed a high prevalence of depressive illness among general populations, in particular among those attending their general practitioner. These high rates suggest that we might be medicalizing the 'miserable well'. DSM III tackled part of the dilemma about the prevalence of depressive illness by introducing the new and controversial category of dysthymic disorder. This involves depressed mood for most of the day, on more days than not, for at least two years; no evidence of an unequivocal major depressive disorder for the first two years; having depressed mood for at least 22 months in the two years; and having two of the following six symptoms: change in appetite, change in sleep pattern, anergia or fatigue, low self-esteem, poor concentration or decision-making, and feelings of hopelessness. Most general practitioners will instantly recognize some of their 'fat folder patients' but the category has not been universally accepted as representing a disturbance of mood rather than one of personality.

A general practitioner, puzzled by the changes which take place in operational definitions of psychiatric illness, would learn much from this little book which is the report of a transatlantic symposium held in London to discuss dysthymic disorder. Unfortunately, I suspect that to really benefit from reading it one requires more familiarity with modern psychiatric research instruments than most of us possess.

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TRY FOR DRY

Mary Medill
Care Taker, Sherbourne (1990)
 56 pages. Price £3.50

This is a very useful little book aimed at patients with urinary incontinence and their carers, although I suspect that many doctors would also profit from reading it. I certainly learned a few things from the book. The advice given is sensible, but best of all it is invariably optimistic about incontinence, a subject on which doctors tend to be incurably pessimistic. Quite simply the book suggests that there is always something that can be done for the incontinent patient and it spells out clearly exactly what can be achieved. There is also a section on chart-keeping and useful information is provided on special garments, pads and bedding for the incontinent patient. A list is also supplied of helpful agencies, books, videos and equipment. There is even a quarterly magazine, *Home and Dry* for anyone with a bladder problem.

My only complaint concerns the author's decision to present many sections as lists of numbered items which makes for turgid reading and lends the book a condescending tone. Nonetheless this is a book for the practice library, the trainee, incontinent patients and their carers.

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THIS IDLE TRADE

On doctors who were writers
David Waldron Smithers
Dragonfly Press, Tunbridge Wells, Kent (1989)
 272 pages. Price £10.95

This is a delightful book tracing the lives and times of medical writers of three centuries from William Denton to Somerset Maugham. David Waldron Smithers, former director of radiotherapy at the Royal Marsden Hospital, takes a discursive view of literary physicians showing how they influenced the medicine and letters of their time. Poetry is represented by Goldsmith and Keats, history by Smollett and fiction by Conan Doyle and Austin Freeman. But the book is not confined to medical writers for the pages are crammed with detail of more than 200 names including musicians, painters and actors. There are insights into contemporaries and friends of literary doctors such as Swift, Darwin, Boswell and Johnson and tales of travel in the high Himalayas with botanist Joseph Hooker.

At times the author seems to lose himself in details of personality and history but he always returns to the theme of writing by, for, from or about medicine, so exemplifying his quotation from Maugham 'I do not know of a better training for a writer than to spend some years in the medical profession'. I shall treasure the comment of Chekhov 'Medicine is my lawful wife and literature my mistress. When I get tired of one I spend the night with the other'.

ROBIN HULL

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chairman, General Practitioner Writers Association

THE MENOPAUSE (video)

Medical Unit, Shelley Masters and Co.
Look it up Ltd, Hoddesdon, Herts
 Price £19.55

There is a plethora of written material of variable quality on the menopause but as yet there is little videotaped material available. I would be happy to use this video either by lending it to individuals or basing a group discussion around it. I particularly liked the useful breakdown into categories which enable the problems of the individual to be discussed in a short period of time. The sections on self-help and hormone replacement therapy are positive and address the main worries and questions asked by patients.

The video is reassuring, clear and concise. It would be helpful for women to watch before entering the menopause and for women already experiencing problems. I would recommend it to other health practitioners. It is available from Look It Up Limited, Freeport Unit 4, Frogmore Estate, Pinder Road, Hoddesdon, Herts EN11 0BR.

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OSTEOPOROSIS 1990

Roger Smith (ed)
Royal College of Physicians, London (1990)
 212 pages. Price £15.00

Most general practitioners know of osteoporosis, but a recent survey of practitioners undertaken by the pharmaceutical industry indicated that many had never actually seen a case. This