



PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN GENERAL PRACTICE
A C Marcus, C Murray Parkes, P Thomson and M Johnston
Oxford University Press (1990)
 406 pages. Price £17.50

In this country most patients who present with psychological problems are treated solely by their general practitioner, now increasingly helped by other members of the extended practice team. Few general practitioners find it easy to understand and to manage the great variety of problems presented by these patients, who can at times be deeply distressed. A new textbook such as this which deals helpfully with psychological problems is therefore to be welcomed.

The authors offer a number of theoretical models for prevention and therapy, and advocate the judicious use of prescribed drugs, considering primary and secondary prevention to be crucial. The section describing the contribution of psychology and the social sciences is particularly useful as is the discussion of the benefits and problems of teamwork. An interesting but overlong section of nearly 100 pages is devoted to the family life cycle and psychosocial transitions, leaving less room for the more familiar traditional classification or illness model which still has its uses in everyday practice. For example, as depression is common and is relatively infrequently referred to a psychiatrist, it would have been useful to have had more detail on its treatment. As it is the reader is forced to look to a different section of the book for guidance on suitable antidepressants. Similarly, the helpful short chapter on schizophrenia might have been expanded in view of the increasing proportion of patients with this condition who are managed in the community.

Psychological problems in general practice consolidates the experience of two general practitioners, a psychologist and a psychiatrist. It therefore provides a good balance between theory and practice with an emphasis on prevention and psychological approaches to treatment.

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PERSONAL CARE

Equipment for disabled people

J M Cochrane (ed)
Oxford Health Authority, Oxford (1990)
 151 pages. Price £7.50

This book, part of the series *Caring for disabled people*, is published for the Department of Health and based on assessments of equipment carried out by a multi-professional team from the Mary Marlborough Lodge in Oxford.

Personal care, especially bathing and toileting, is probably the area that gives most distress and embarrassment to disabled peo-

ple; this fact has been recognized by manufacturers and there has been an increase in the number of appliances available. Some of these appliances are very expensive and the cost does not always reflect the usefulness of the product.

Each section in the book commences with an aide memoire of the points to consider in the provision of equipment. There follow descriptions of the various appliances available together in most instances with photographs. The descriptions give a summary of the positive features of the appliance and any problems that might arise or any limitations in its use. Equally important, there is a price indicated for most items.

Several surveys have shown that disabled people and their families are often unaware of the availability of many items of equipment, and it is up to the general practitioner to draw their attention to the appliances and point them in the right direction for advice on the type of appliance that is most appropriate to their needs. It would, therefore, have been useful if more indication could have been given about whether individual items have to be purchased or are available on loan, through the community occupational therapist from social services departments, or from the National Health Service community health stores.

However, *Equipment for disabled people* would be found useful by all general practitioners in reminding or indeed informing them of the range of equipment available. It would also be useful to lend to patients and their families to help them to make an informed decision about which items would meet their needs.

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MEASURING THE QUALITY OF MEDICAL CARE

Anthony Hopkins
RCP Publications, London (1990)
 90 pages. Price £7.00.

MEASURING THE OUTCOMES OF MEDICAL CARE

Anthony Hopkins and David Costain (eds)
RCP Publications, London (1990)
 109 pages. Price £7.00

These slim volumes offer an interesting and entertaining foray into the complexities of medical audit. For those who are worried that the main meal of outcome audit may prove indigestible, the examples quoted in these books provide appetizing first tastes. For example, we may all have felt that taking routine blood tests preoperatively in young people is a waste of time, and evidence to support this view is cited here. For patients under the age of 50 years, routine urine testing is a sufficient biochemical preoperative screen.

In *Measuring the quality of medical care* Dr Hopkins provides a succinct and coherent review, primarily of quality measurement in hospital care. His level-headed and well-informed approach to the subject is very refreshing. In the final chapter he identifies examples of subjects suitable for prospective audit. These include: use of skull x-rays in the accident and emergency department; accuracy of diagnostic coding; waiting times for appointments in outpatient departments; waiting times for 'cold' surgery, for example herniorrhaphy, coronary bypass surgery, hip replacement and surgical treatment of varicose veins; use of chest x-rays in patients under the age of 60 years; and use of hypnotic/psychotropic medication in the elderly.

Although many of these subjects relate particularly to hospital practice, some are also relevant to general practice and reflect the down-to-earth approach which is evident in the rest of the book. Dr Hopkins concludes the book by arguing for the need for more guidelines of good practice for common disorders. These are presented not as sticks with which to beat recalcitrant clinicians, but as tools for identifying likely targets for improvements in resources and organizational services.

The companion volume, *Measuring the outcomes of medical care*, is a collection of papers presented at the September 1989 conference of the Royal College of Physicians and King's Fund Centre. The content of the book is naturally rather uneven but the wide range of contributions makes for interesting reading. For example, it includes Rachel Rosser's paper on the technical

and ethical issues involved in using quality adjusted life years as a means of informing health service decisions about the allocation of resources. H J McQuay, on the other hand, has contributed a paper on the assessment of pain and its treatment.

In general practice we have shied away from attempting to measure outcomes of intervention. We may feel more comfortable examining processes of care. In his paper, David Metcalfe tackles the measurement of outcomes in general practice head on. He boldly lists the tasks of general practice as: primary prevention, secondary control (screening and case finding), exclusion of illness, care of acute disease, care of chronic illness, care of psychiatric illness and terminal care. For each of these tasks he identifies outcome measures and emphasizes the need to learn from other disciplines. 'The subject of care is not a system, but a person, and the effectiveness of care must therefore be measured comprehensively, using unfamiliar and uncomfortable instruments from colleagues outside medicine.'

Because the range of activities and responsibilities in general practice is so wide, it is impossible to know where to start. The value of audit projects is enhanced if they can be performed as a collaborative exercise by a number of different practices. Individual general practitioners and especially those involved in creating audit packages for their colleagues will find these companion volumes useful.

GRAHAM BUCKLEY

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