



MEASURES OF NEED AND OUTCOME FOR PRIMARY HEALTH CARE

*D Wilkin, L Hallam and M-A Doggett
Oxford University Press (1991)
301 pages. Price £30.00*

Although there are already a number of books on the subject of health measurement, this text has advantages in two areas. First, the authors offer some valuable insights into the methodology of health status measurement, a rather more complex field than clinical researchers often appreciate. Secondly, for all but one of the 40 measures reviewed, there are examples demonstrating at least part of the questionnaire. Often the scoring system for the measure is also demonstrated.

Inevitably there are some limitations to an approach which selects and reviews what the authors readily admit is a limited selection from the huge array of measures now available. By the time a book such as this is published new measures, or new versions of previous measures, have become available. The problem is to some extent overcome by pointing out that the difficulty exists, and by providing an excellent, selective literature review. Perhaps more controversially there is only a small section on condition specific measures, of which there are many examples in the literature. If change in health status as a result of intervention is to be evaluated, general health status measures may not provide enough discrimination.

Nevertheless, while this is not a book for the average general practice library, researchers and clinicians with an interest in health status measurement — and particularly doctors who feel inclined to send out a questionnaire — will find it a useful addition to the literature.

ALLEN HUTCHINSON
*Programme director, Ambulatory Care Programme,
University of Newcastle upon Tyne*

THE COMPUTER-BASED PATIENT RECORD FOR HEALTH CARE

*An essential technology for health care
R S Dick and E B Steen (eds)
National Academy Press, Washington (1991)
190 pages. Price £21.50*

Without wishing to sound xenophobic, there is a discernible, and often irritating, association between the words 'American' and 'expert'. When an organization is being reviewed, trips are made to the United States of America to study the solutions applied there; when aspiring medical registrars want to bolster their curriculum vitae, they spend a year in the USA; and when a guru is required for audit, he or she usually has an American accent. It therefore comes as a surprise to read a current American book which reads as though it were written about a decade ago, and which is produced by a committee which includes many of the gurus.

The usefulness of the medical record in the USA has been severely retarded by the absence of a registered list in primary care and by open access to secondary care. Since patients may

be seeing a wide range of health professionals, each unaware of the thoughts and activities of the other, Americans have little experience of a total patient record, manual or computer.

This book marks their awakening to the theoretical benefits of a computerized patient record and it paints the same optimistic and simplistic picture that we were beguiled by in the early years of computerization. Here you will find the lure of aggregated data with no real discussion of the coding structure required; accuracy, completeness and variation in coding; authorship; data trails and alterations; data status (speculative, provisional, confirmed, and so on); and the formidable problems of aggregation.

It seems, perhaps, that one of the regrettable but inevitable side effects of being regarded as an expert is that one becomes complacent in one's efforts to learn from the experience of others. In reading this book I may be as guilty of this as the authors themselves, but this does seem to be one area where the United Kingdom is well ahead of the USA, if only in the sense that we have left behind theoretical certainties and are deep into the problematic realities.

MIKE PRINGLE
Senior lecturer, Department of General Practice, University of Nottingham

COMPLEMENTARY MEDICINE TODAY: PRACTITIONERS AND PATIENTS

*Ursula Sharma
Routledge, London (1991)
233 pages. Price £12.99 (p/b), £35.00 (h/b)*

Complementary medicine should be taken seriously. Its use as a popular form of self determination in health care, and as a form of progressively professionalized 'lay' medicine is widely prevalent. It is also increasingly to be found in the repertoire of general practice, and occasionally in hospital and industrial medicine. Most general practitioners are well aware of this trend; some regard it grudgingly, some tolerantly and some enthusiastically. Trainees are well disposed towards complementary medicine; at Glasgow University medical undergraduates are soon to encounter the subject formally within their curriculum. However, the question of efficacy still awaits the formal proof that will satisfy conventional scientific mores.

The implications of complementary medicine for our understanding of the phenomenology and natural history of illness and healing, and of human (and animal) biology have hardly been realized, but its social, cultural and political dimensions are more familiar. It is these issues that are addressed in Ursula Sharma's book, and she does this well.

The book examines the characteristics and motivation of those who use complementary medicine and those who practise it. It reflects upon the significance of its popularity; the concept of working with nature to promote healing rather than manipulating it to control disease; and the desire for more participation and responsibility in treatment. It examines the tension between the defensive professionalism of conventional prac-

tioners and the aspiring but unregulated professionalism of complementary practitioners, and the challenges that face the health care system in order to achieve reconciliation, integration and the best possible care for the patient.

Sharma draws upon her own and a wide range of published research, mostly sociological or anthropological but all pertinent. Her style is lively and readable, and her commentary on the various themes is perceptive. The book is always interesting, often entertaining, and should certainly encourage a better informed, more thoughtful and more constructive approach to a subject that is likely to be high on the medical agenda of the 1990s.

JEREMY SWAYNE
Homoeopathic physician, Wells

THE HEALTH OF THE NATION

The BMJ view

R Smith (ed)

British Medical Journal, London (1991)

237 pages. Price £9.95

The green paper *The health of the nation* is really about the health of the English or those of us living in England. The Secretary of State for Health has asked for consultation, and in an ironic statement says '... a strategy imposed by Govern-

ment which takes no heed of the views of those who will have to implement it, including the people themselves, is valueless'. The *British Medical Journal* seized the opportunity and sought the views of 28 different groups and individuals, but no general practitioner, and have now published the series in book form.

The *British Medical Journal's* commentary is much more lively and interesting than the green paper and a minister looking for guidance will find such help in many of the chapters. While there is disagreement about priorities, everyone is agreed that there should be a strategy for health. In a provocative contribution, the Radical Statistics Group observes that only six out of 151 pages in the document are devoted to action outside the National Health Service although most scope for improving health may actually lie outside the NHS. This is a recurrent theme and there is a recognition of the political disincentives for action with, for example, alcohol and tobacco bringing in an annual £12 billion to the Treasury, while spending on health is £30 billion. For all that, there is a surprising lack of cynicism in the robust views expressed, and the 'abominable no-men' who doubt the value of screening have been sidelined.

The correspondence provoked by the series of papers as they were published is also included and indicates a lively concern for the health of the nation.

TOM O'DOWD
General practitioner, Nottingham

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