



ABC OF ALCOHOL (third edition)
BMJ Publishing Group, London (1994)
 32 pages. Price £7.95

This well written book has been a firm favourite of mine since it first appeared over 10 years ago. The present edition, which has been revised extensively, is completely up to date. Even readers familiar with the previous editions will find it worth reading. The subject is covered succinctly, but in surprising breadth and depth through good use of inset boxes and graphics.

The authors describe the ways in which alcohol can harm minds, bodies, families, societies and economies covering not only the medical consequences but also the scale of the social problem. It is important for general practitioners to be aware of the wider issue and not to see alcohol problems purely in terms of health education and treatment. Those measures which could reduce the harm are discussed — raising the price, random breath testing, advertising bans and better enforcement of the law. The tangled politics, including the government's apparent unwillingness to play its part in reducing the harm, are covered thoroughly.

The alcohol problem has replaced syphilis as the great mimic. Detection of the problem drinker is covered thoroughly and the general practice chapter covers the general practitioner's role since the change in health promotion regulations. Clear and practical advice is given on how to ask patients about their drinking and in the following chapter there is sensible guidance on how to intervene when patients are drinking excessively.

This book is well worth buying for everyone in the practice to read.

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COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN PRIMARY CARE
Occasional paper 64

Zoë Heritage (ed)
Royal College of General Practitioners, London (1994)
 37 pages. Price £9.90 (RCGP members £9.00)

'Community participation should not be seen as an extra activity that has to be fitted into primary care's already hectic schedule: it is a principle that should underpin other activities.' This is the initially reassuring, but ultimately challenging, theme of this occasional paper. It is not enough to do our work well if we fail to meet the needs of the community in which we work.

But how can I get people to participate? Is it enough, or even necessary, to set up a patient participation group? Can I risk sharing power with my patients? These are the questions in the

minds of many general practitioners and the paper does tackle them. But the authors go beyond the examples of good practice they present and raise other more fundamental questions. The excellent chapter on the organization of participation raises important questions about the messages our practices project; people need to feel they will be listened to, not lectured to. Health promotion too requires participation, by helping communities identify and develop a healthy approach to the problems they face. Examples like the Wells Park project's reminiscence group for elderly people and the use of art to promote self esteem illustrate this well.

One chapter reports on the community consultation process involved in setting up a primary health care resource centre in Newcastle upon Tyne, an exercise which could be copied by any practice planning new premises. However, few of the other examples reported communities being given real choices about their health care. Perhaps the key lies in the fact that Northern Regional Health Authority funded the project in Newcastle; if the health service wants communities to participate in decisions about health, it will need to fund the work involved.

Reading this paper has prepared me well for our practice 'awayday'; we plan to think about where we are and where we should be going. Zoë Heritage and her colleagues have reminded me that our patients may have another perspective, if only we would listen.

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ACCESS TO MEDICAL RECORDS AND REPORTS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Robert Cowley
Radcliffe Medical Press, Oxford (1993)
 176 pages. Price £14.95

Three new major pieces of legislation — the data protection act 1984, the access to medical reports act 1988 and the access to health records act 1990 — confer on patients a right of access to their medical records. This guide to the law, written by a barrister, is intended mainly for hospital health workers. It must be the driest medical book this side of *Gray's anatomy*, but nonetheless, it is clear and all terms are adequately explained.

The book is in two parts. The first comprises discussion and clarification concerning patient access to computerized and manual records, access and litigation, and professional confidence and third party access. The second part, in the form of appendices, reproduces the relevant legislation, regulations and guidance for implementation of the act in the health service.