



WINNING THE WAR ON DRUGS: TO LEGALISE OR NOT?

Richard Stevenson

Institute of Economic Affairs, London (1994)

92 pages. Price £8.50

Much of the so-called 'war on drugs' is a war of words, where the rhetoric of prominent politicians and policemen prompts instant and extensive media coverage. However, in the last decade the battle lines have shifted away from the prohibition camp and towards advocates of legalization and decriminalization.

This latest salvo is from the Institute of Economic Affairs. It is a paper advocating legalization as an economically sensible proposition, with two commentaries, for and against the main paper. The costs of prohibition, particularly in drug-related crime, gangsterism and law enforcement are well described. Drugs are seen as a commodity and the problems and solutions are seen in terms of those that affect supply and demand — and save money. The solution proposed is a relatively free, but legal, market system for the production and distribution of drugs.

The problem with the main paper is that it is unconvincing. Insufficient data are provided to support the case for legalization. Indeed, the gains from legalization are largely speculative. More space could have been given to intermediate options such as limited legalization of, for example, cannabis, and decriminalization. These are only covered fleetingly in the commentaries, but are much more likely to be implemented.

This paper succeeds in being provocative. However, I suspect that it will be of more interest to politicians than practitioners.

MORRIS GALLAGHER

General practitioner, South Shields, Tyne and Wear

DOWN WITH GLOOM! OR HOW TO DEFEAT DEPRESSION

Brice Pitt

Royal College of Psychiatrists/Gaskell, London (1994)

126 pages. Price £3.50

For more than two years the Royal College of General Practitioners has been associated with the Royal College of Psychiatrists in the defeat depression campaign.

If the objectives of the campaign are being achieved then most general practitioners will already have been reminded of the need to reduce the stigma associated with depression. General practitioners will know already the frequency of depression, with 5% of the population experiencing it in a major form at any one time and with perhaps twice as many more experiencing some depressive symptoms. They will know also that depression affects all social groups and can occur at any age.

The campaign has set out to improve the diagnosis and management of depressed patients, most of whom are treated entirely within general practice. The campaign intends also to explore the potential for preventing depressive illness through earlier recognition of symptoms. A consensus statement for the recognition and treatment of depression in general practice has been published.

The second phase of the defeat depression campaign aims to enhance public awareness of the nature, course and treatment of depressive disorders and to encourage people to seek help more readily from primary care and mental health services. The book is intended for the general public, not necessarily for those who are experiencing depression but at least for those who have a relative or friend with the disorder and any others who have a general interest in finding out more about one of the five key areas of the *Health of the nation* strategy. Its author, Brice Pitt, is the public education director of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the drawings in it are the work of Mel Calman who, sadly, is now dead. The combination of clear and well informed writing with wry but perceptive illustrations makes this book an outstanding example of its genre of books aimed at educating the public. I think all general practitioners should read it, if only to learn how to put difficult concepts into clear, plain language. Similarly, general practitioners should encourage all their staff to read it. Despite the authors' caveats I would lend my copy of the book to any patient facing a diagnosis of depressive illness for the first time.

This book is a gem. Buy it, read it, and recommend it.

PAUL FREELING

*Emeritus professor in general practice,
St George's Hospital Medical School, London*

STUDYING HEALTH AND DISEASE

Kevin McConway (ed)

Open University Press, Buckingham (1994)

148 pages. Price £12.99

The overall aim of this book is 'to provide readers with a critical understanding of the ways our knowledge of health and disease was arrived at'. Judged by its declared objective, this book succeeds. Though it belongs to a series of books, it is self contained and I found it provided a clear and basic introduction to scientific methods in medicine. As it makes clear on several occasions, it is not its purpose to produce expert epidemiologists or statisticians, but to give the research minded doctor (or medical scientist) a grasp of relevant issues.

In the second chapter, the limits of science and the basis of scientific reasoning are discussed. The contrast between the reductionist and holistic approaches is neatly illustrated using tuberculosis as an example. The reductionist approach is concerned exclusively with the tuberculosis bacillus whereas the