



CANCER PREVENTION IN PRIMARY CARE

Joan Austoker

BMJ Publishing Group, London (1995)

181 pages. Price £12.95

Cancer prevention is a subject of interest to all, potential patients as well as those responsible for patients' care. Traditionally, the main emphasis in general practice has been on treatment rather than prevention. In recent years, however, the importance of preventive care has become increasingly reflected in the workload of the general practitioner. The government's action in forcing this role on the general practitioner is a bone of contention, but the profession's almost masochistic delight in wanting to rise to every challenge has meant that the burden of responsibility has been accepted and that lessons only vaguely remembered (if indeed they were ever taught) have had to be brought to the forefront of consciousness. Fortunately, the general practitioner is no longer alone in bearing this responsibility, and now has a primary health care team with which to share it.

With this background, it is not surprising that many articles and books are being published on cancer prevention in primary care, and this is one such book written by the director of the Cancer Research Campaign, primary care education research group at the University of Oxford. Her background and qualifications are not to be found, but the impressive list of acknowledgements and glowing reference by Professor David Mant in the preface suggest that it is a scientific and possibly medical background.

The book is well set out in a series of chapters, commencing with 'setting the scene'. In some ways this is the most important chapter and sets out the overall needs, strengths and weaknesses of cancer prevention in primary care. Together with the final chapter, which deals with current trends and prospects for the future, one wonders whether the intervening chapters are necessary. The answer is that they provide a clearly written, easily understood and well-referenced set of chapters on three lifestyles and five disease processes that could be influenced by prevention. The former are smoking, alcohol intake and diet; the latter are the important diseases of melanoma, breast cancer, cervical cancer, ovarian, prostate and testicular cancers, and colorectal cancer.

As a practising general practitioner, one is aware of the almost paranoid feeling one has at being made to feel the sole person responsible for the abolition of these bad habits and serious diseases. However, the author retains a realistic attitude to what is possible and is not afraid to criticize both the public and the government for their lack of enthusiasm in carrying out any advice offered by the medical profession.

This is a book for reading rather than using as a reference work, and the whole primary health care team, especially health

promotion nurses, should be advised to be aware, at least, of the messages it conveys.

Perhaps a copy of this book should be sent to the Department of Health and the relevant government ministers who believe that they only have to dictate the terms for others to achieve the targets set out in the government's *Health of the nation* document. In this way they may become aware that many aspects of health promotion and disease prevention are the responsibility of government. Perhaps they may make a start by listening to the advice of the medical profession concerning advertising and its effect on smoking.

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THE MANAGEMENT OF BACK PAIN IN GENERAL PRACTICE

Royal College of General Practitioners clinical series

Martin E Barker

RCGP, London (1995)

31 pages. Price £9.99 (RCGP members £9.00)

This is another welcome addition to the Royal College of General Practitioners clinical series, especially with recent renewed interest in the primary care treatment of back pain. Barker, a general practitioner, has published widely on back pain. In a slim 31 page volume, this book brings together the literature under the headings of classification, treatment, investigation and referral.

Barker presents his own classification of simple back pain accounting for 90% of acute presentations seen in general practice. This he compares with other classifications that are not so common in general practice. I thought the terms 'good' and 'bad' backs an attractive approach.

The research evidence for common physical therapies is critically reviewed with a conclusion in line with the Department of Health clinical standards advisory group report on back pain published in 1994. Barker is in favour of a positive approach, using behavioural methods of treatment. He advocates manipulative skills being learnt by general practitioners, although further trials are needed. Finally there is a short review of traction, lumbar supports and surgery. There is a comprehensive reference list for the research-minded reader although some of the views presented are based on the author's unpublished studies.