

before we act. All the same, the book is to be welcomed for the valuable features which it undoubtedly contains. It is to be hoped that if there is a second edition some of the philosophical reasoning employed will be considerably tightened.

A final comment on a particular claim of the author's. Is it true to say that 'When we come to [the question of] . . . what criteria are to be used to determine whether death has occurred, we are confronted with a very technical medical issue, for which only those within the medical profession can provide the answer' (p 29)? Surely we must distinguish between two distinct questions here: first, 'What are the criteria for death?', and secondly, 'Do the criteria apply in the case of this particular human body? The doctor is presumably the person who must answer the second question, but he is not indubitably the sole authority on the first.

F J FITZPATRICK
Education and Research Officer,
The Linacre Centre for the Study
of the Ethics of Health Care, London

The Bitter Pill

Ellen Grant, 184 pages, London, £7.95, Elm Tree Books/Hamish Hamilton Ltd, 1985.

The dust jacket for this book (pill-burning on one side and shock-horror newspaper headlines on the other) sets the tone for the author's no doubt sincere but grossly biased account of the

consequences of oral contraception. The book is semi-autobiographical, recounting the author's development from being an enthusiastic prescriber of and researcher on the Pill to her present extreme position of advising that no women should ever take the Pill. The problem, however, is that from the point at which she decided that oral contraception was a bad thing, she seems to have lost any capacity to assess the evidence objectively. She states (correctly) that negative associations between the Pill and disease do not prove a protective effect, but repeatedly assumes that positive associations *are* proof of causation. She explains away all reassuring findings of cohort studies by alleging that (a) most unhealthy women would be denied the Pill initially so must be in the control group; (b) most women will have such severe side-effects from the Pill that they will drop out and be excluded from the analysis, or even counted as controls; (c) many or most of the controls will be receiving other hormones – thus only the 'tough' healthy individuals taking the Pill are compared with invalid controls. I doubt whether the researchers in the major cohort studies would recognise this description of their life's work – but in any event, if it were true, it is difficult to understand how so many reports of adverse side-effects *have* emerged from cohort studies.

The style of the book will certainly not appeal to medical readers. Each chapter starts with a 'common belief' then refuted by a 'fact', but Dr Grant refutes her own 'facts'. For example, on page 19 she states that commonly used Pills have an almost identical hormone

balance, then on page 53 says, blood levels of Pill progesterone vary by a factor of ten. The book is full of anecdotes about individual women (such as one who had years of ill-health after two oral contraceptive tablets) and astonishing statements such as 'many women who need kidney transplants could have had their kidneys damaged by taking the Pill' or 'ballet teachers in London have complained that their pupils are now having more unexpected fractures'. The Pill is blamed for increases in violence to children, divorce, suicide and accidental deaths among other things. Some references are given but most of the statements are quite unsupported.

I fear, however, that the book, with its lurid cover, its apparently scientific approach and its alarmist message will sell well to the general public, and that Dr Grant will have done a disservice to women by denying them an objective assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of this important method of contraception. There is some very loosely relevant material about 'clinical ecology' in which Dr Grant is now in private practice. Her proposal on contraception is that young women should abstain from sex, and older couples should use barrier methods. I do not consider that she has made her case in this book and would not recommend it as a source of enlightenment.

MARION HALL
Consultant in Obstetrics
and Gynaecology, Aberdeen
Maternity Hospital, Aberdeen