Book reviews

Healers and Alternative Medicine – a Sociological Examination

Gary Easthope, 209 pages, London, £8.50, Edward Arnold, 1978.

'I tried to patch this jumble into whole cloth. The problem was it kept falling apart at the seams'. In his honest introduction, the author acknowledges the major flaw in this book. As he goes on to admit, it would have required a team of physiologists, doctors, psychologists and sociologists to do the work properly. Such a team is currently being assembled at St Mary's Hospital Medical School – whether it does the work properly is as yet to be determined. It will, nevertheless, find Easthope's book a useful addition to this subject.

He explores five categories of healers including the spiritual healers, miraculous healing (Lourdes), radiesthesia, eastern healers and healers from the Philippines. The most useful addition to these descriptions is the verbatim accounts of a 'healing session' that enable the reader to make his own judgement as to the nature of what is actually occurring between the healer and the patient. It is clear that Easthope feels that some of what he saw would fall into the accepted definition of magic, charlatanism and pure quackery.

Nevertheless, the sociologist in him makes a very necessary and often neglected analysis of the meaning that these ritual acts carry. His comments on the nature of science, the importance of symbols and the move from the natural to the cultural are common debates in sociological disciplines but are not sufficiently engrained in medical education for doctors to grasp the complexity of their task. We are in part both scientists and Shamans, and need

to heal the split within us before the split in 'alternative' and 'orthodox' medicine will be healed.

Easthope's last two chapters on the nature of healing and the nature of man are however disappointing and poorly researched. He uses Maxwell Cades's model for an explanation of the 'energetic' base to the human condition but fails to mention much of the recent work undertaken both here and in the United States of America which puts forward a much better argument and incorporates evidence that even sceptics would find convincing. An expanded second edition would allow this book to compete with those already available on this subject. As it is, it is a useful and necessary read for the serious researcher.

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Ethical Issues in Family Medicine

Ronald J Christie, Barry C Hoffmaster, 194 pages, Oxford, £20.00, Oxford University Press, 1986.

This book is aimed at practising general practitioners and GP trainees. The authors are two Canadian professors, one a philosopher and the other a family practitioner. They based their work on seminars which they gave to a group of graduates drawn from their respective departments. Their starting point is that neither utilitarian nor deontological theory is of much use for the working general practitioner in helping with day-to-day ethical problems.

In the first few chapters they attempt to discredit the classical school of medical ethics, but unfortunately use a rather 'Aunt Sallyish' approach, setting

up the opposition in extreme positions before starting their arguments which are of course, easily won. The authors go on to suggest that a new 'middle way', which they describe as 'patient welfare' must be found. They argue that this can be done by a 'bottom-up' – ie rule-generating, method. Case studies are the basis of this approach.

In their discussion of the cases the authors adopt a rather paternalistic position, allowing patients to make their own decisions – but only as long as the doctor feels that the patient won't regret that decision at some time in the future. I think this is an approach that many general practitioners will feel comfortable with. In chapter six, entitled 'Toward an Ethic of Family Medicine' the authors write:

'In conclusion, this chapter suggests a way of developing an ethics of family medicine that transcends the prevailing obsession with autonomy understood as unconstrained freedom of decision-making. The rampant individualism of this approach to applied ethics is not compatible with the biopsychosocial systems orientation of family medicine.'

The book goes on to examine a much wider range of issues than are normally considered by medical ethicists. The topics range from difficult patients to conflict with hospital colleagues, from treating the family as the patient to non-payment of bills. Case studies again are the method of introduction to these subjects. The cases are discussed and rules-of-thumb generated, but no grand theory emerges. Perhaps this is an unrealistic expectation and the reader should be content with what is offered. I was, however, left with a faintly hollow feeling after finishing the book, as one whose pet theory has been unjustly criticised by someone with nothing substantive to offer in its place.

If, however, the book is taken as an excursion through the difficult ethical