Book reviews

Placebos and the Philosophy of Medicine

Howard Brody, MD, PhD,
University of Chicago Press, 1980,
164 pp (No price)

Every doctor knows, or thinks he knows, what a placebo is and what effects it may have. Dr Brody has cured me of this misapprehension but after reading his book my concepts are not much clearer. This is my fault rather than his. I just find philosophical arguments difficult to follow. After I have grappled with each sentence I find that I have forgotten the previous one so that I get lost. This is not a book for those who, like me, have predominantly objective and visual concepts of physical and mental processes.

Dr Brody starts by outlining the need for a coherent philosophy of the relationship of mind and body and the ethical aspects of medical interference in their activities. He reviews the literature on placebos, showing how confused, and even contradictory, medical theories have been about their nature and action. This leads on to an attempt to achieve definitions of 'placebo' and 'placebo effect' which can bear philosophical weight, which is illustrated by clinical vignettes of seven different circumstances of placebo effect. He dismisses existing definitions as too imprecise or too vague, and proposes a clearer more precise definition of placebo as 'a form of medical therapy, or an intervention designed to simulate medical therapy, that at the time of its use is believed not to be a specific therapy for the condition for which it is offered and that is used either for its psychological effect or to eliminate observer bias in an experimental setting'.

The going gets harder as he reviews traditional concepts of the mind-body relationship rejecting most of them, ending up with a position called 'eliminative materialism' and going on to present and

justify in some detail, little of which I could follow, a 'Theory of the Person'. This leads on to a review of 'Ethical Problems in Placebo Use', concluding that the arguments which favour their use 'are notable for the cavalier attitude which they display towards patient deception' and pleading for 'eliciting a placebo effect by non-deceptive means from a utilitarian standpoint'. (We are lucky in not having to consider problems of our patients having to pay as much for placebos as for expensive drugs.) He makes suggestions for further research in this field of medicine and discusses the practical use of placebos, dismissing four commonly held medical myths about their use and recommending more logical and co-operative ways of dealing with the sorts of conditions for which doctors normally use placebos. He finally concludes: 'Properly developed, a study of placebo effect can do much to highlight the centrality of the whole person both to the philosophy of medicine and to medical practice'.

I doubt whether this book, short as it is, will be widely read or have much impact on medical practice, for few doctors have learned to wade through intense philosophical reasoning. But if they only skim through it they will come to realise that the use of placebos is not the easy matter that their simple chemistry might suggest.

CHARLES FLETCHER

Talking with Patients—A Teaching Approach

The Nuffield Provincial Hospitals Trust, 1979 55 pp, 50p.

If a survey were carried out asking doctors to rate their own ability to communicate with patients, one suspects that the results would be similar to those of a survey which showed that over 80 per cent of drivers regarded themselves as 'above average' in driving skill. One might also find that some of the

doctors who had doubts about their performance in consultation might in fact be good communicators.

The pitfalls of consultation are succinctly explored in *Talking with Patients—A Teaching Approach*, a booklet compiled by a Nuffield Working Party on Communications with Patients, chaired by Professor Sir John Walton, Dean of Medicine and Professor of Neurology at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The booklet can be ingested in one sitting but provides much food for thought. The clinical interview and the exposition are followed by three useful appendices and a valuable annotated bibliography by Professor Charles Fletcher.

In the section on the interview it states 'In the course of the clinical years, students' interviewing skills may actually deteriorate, rather than improve. Before they have acquired much medical knowledge, they tend to listen to what patients have to tell them and to express interest and concern about their psychological reactions to their illness and their social difficulties. When they have learned more about disease, they tend to make a quick provisional diagnosis and to confine the patient during the rest of the interview to answering questions which appear relevant to this diagnosis'—a mistake we have all made.

Introducing 'The Exposition' the authors comment 'Despite the difficulties which many students find in acquiring a good interviewing technique, many doctors do become skilled interviewers. But how overcome the difficulties of explaining the necessity of treatment; of persuading him to change his way of life; of breaking bad news and perhaps confessing the inadequacy of therapy, while at the same time retaining his confidence'. Ways of improving the exposition include better verbal information, considering what the patient wants to know, written instructions, tape recordings of information, feedback on patients' intake of information,