What is to be Done about Illness and Health – Crisis In The Eighties


This is a book which will excite strong emotions in its medical if not its lay readers.

The first section looks at the social causes of disease. A series of interviews provide a moving image of the health problems of ordinary people in the inner city. The strains of working where productivity matters more than people; the feelings of powerlessness which arise when confronting massive bureaucracies, including the health service; and the complex interactions of poor housing, exploitative jobs and poverty are vividly portrayed.

This human aspect is underpinned by a brief presentation of the epidemiological data linking poverty with ill health. The result is a blending of Inside the Inner City and the Black report, which makes its point strongly and uncompromisingly. Better health is not merely a matter of more money for the National Health Service (NHS); it requires a questioning of how people are forced to live and of placing profits before people.

Unfortunately, the second and third sections of the book, which consider the present role of the health service and how things could be organised better, fail to maintain the same high standard. The depersonalisation when hospital patients are treated as cases and not as people; the irony of running a hospital as a 'health-care factory' which exploits its workers and promotes their ill-health just as any other profit-oriented factory; and the contrast between the glamour of high technology medicine and the real human needs of the chronically sick and disabled are important points. The discussion of what medicine can and cannot offer society is sane and well balanced. However, though many important criticisms of the way in which the health service operates are made, and the limitations of medicine pointed out, there is a lack of factual support or logical argument for the criticisms made. The use of individual cases to make points, rather than to illustrate points supported by data, gives those who wish to the chance to dismiss the case cited as unrepresentative of the general situation. An irritation is the use of a nebulous 'we' without any clear antecedent in many unsupported assertions, which creates a tone of peevish aggressive moral superiority. 'We were told we were entering the era of unproblematical contraception' – Who was? By whom?

As a general practitioner, I felt that the treatment of primary care was far too superficial and sketchy. Perhaps because I am a white male doctor I thought the decision to place all the blame for medical hubris on doctors was simplistic. I would have welcomed a discussion of why society colludes in attributing to doctors powers they do not have, and in seeking miracle cures where there are none. The role of the media in this process, and people's need to control problems by medicalisation, are ignored. The doctor-blaming also meant that the oppression of junior hospital doctors, with their 104-hour week and its implications for patient care, was ignored. I found the assumption that there exists an ugly, working-class, health-care consciousness in anything other than an inchoate form unconvincing, and would have welcomed more consideration of how such a consciousness could be helped to develop and organise.

The concluding consideration of the possible better systems of care is rather sketchy and uncertain. The alternative ways of working which are being tried are hinted at rather than discussed, and in the final chapter an apocalyptic vision of a possible socialist health centre is extremely thinly drawn.

This book approaches questions which are vital for anyone who is unhappy with the present state of society and of the health service – which surely all thoughtful people are. In spite of its dogmatic assertions and some lack of factual support, the validity of its basic case should not be dismissed.

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On the Uses of the Humanities: Vision and Application

A report by the Hastings Center on a project on applied humanities and public policy. Project co-directors: Daniel Callahan, Arthur Caplan, Bruce Jennings, 74 pages, New York, $8.00
The Hastings Center, 1984

The Hastings Center was established in 1969 to address ethical problems in medicine, biology and the behavioural sciences. In this report three co-directors of a project provide help for the teacher who recognise the need for the