

updating, and that the way to do this was for distinguished doctors to distil their accumulated wisdom in personal reflections on their own experience of learning, doctoring and teaching. Dr Bulger also expresses a wish to provide a written analogue of various inspirational encounters in his own history. Unfortunately even those who possess wisdom, or can inspire by personal example, cannot necessarily transmit that wisdom or inspiration in writing; it is all too easy to lapse instead into idiosyncrasy and platitude.

Dr Bulger has in fact put together a very heterogeneous set of articles, reflecting his conviction that something is wrong with US medicine, and that the cure is a reform of US medical ethics, starting with the motivation of individual practitioners, and an expansion of the concept of scientific medicine into more holistic healing. Apart from reflecting the editor's interests, the collection has little coherence. It encompasses many different styles or genres, for instance: personal musings on the ethics of medicine; the application of psychiatric theory to ethics; sociological description of healing in different cultures; accounts of key personal experiences within and outside medicine; historical studies of Hippocrates and the Hippocratic corpus; reflections on the ethics of truth-telling in medicine, and an embarrassing fictional dialogue between Hippocrates and a revered colleague of the editor, in which Dr Bulger puts his own re-writing of the Hippocratic oath into the mouth of Hippocrates himself.

In Britain at any rate, few could find much to object to in Dr Bulger's new oath; its interest lies in why it is felt to be necessary and pertinent in the USA now. But what is conspicuously lacking in most of the essays – particularly in the editor's own (seven) contributions – is any very clear or powerful analysis, or even description, of exactly what is felt to be wrong with US medicine, let alone evidence for the analysis or careful argument for the proposed cures. Exceptions to this are the articles by Drs Relman and Reiser, which do at least offer a coherent story and an intelligible link between the perceived ills (excessive commercialism, impersonality and fragmentation of care into multiple medical and technological specialisms) and the proposed remedies (greater social responsibility in and tighter control by the medical profession as a body, and greater understanding of the uses and effects of

new technologies on care). But the collection contains virtually no sustained ethical argument; we are offered instead deeply felt but unexciting personal convictions (such as, for instance, the belief that doctors should put patients' interests first, listen to them, talk to them, tell them the truth, and be motivated by an ideal of service). Transmitting wisdom requires something more than this, even though the authors may well have good store of wisdom between them. However, perhaps the reader can distil his or her own from the good thoughts and interesting ideas that do from time to time crop up. It is moreover interesting for a British reader to find that just when private medicine is being encouraged to expand in the UK and market economics and entrepreneurial verve are extolled as the answer to all social ills, US doctors are lamenting the effects of just these factors on their own system of delivering medical care, and are calling for greater social responsibility, collective thinking, and disinterested service in the medical professions.

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## Shared concern

Video; Society of Parents Helping in Education, 1987. Available for sale for £45 from King's Fund Centre, 126 Albert Street, London NW1 7NF and for hire from CFL Vision, Chalfont Grove, Gerrards Cross, SL9 8TN (02407 4433) ref UK 3965, for £10.50. Cost includes P & P, VAT and booklets.

Shared concern (subtitled *Breaking the news to parents that their newborn child has a disability*), is a video made for medical and health workers and students by SOPHIE – Society Of Parents Helping In Education. SOPHIE originates from a group of parents with children with varying disabilities. Most members of the group were dissatisfied with many of the services and wanted to help to improve them. They regarded 'breaking the news as the first crucial step undertaken, and the one which had the most lasting effect on our lives, and on those of our children'. Concerned that medical students had little training in this area, they made the video.

The strength of the video is the restrained and careful way in which it portrays and discusses many aspects of breaking sad news to parents. There is a

fine balance of sympathy and respect; sadness does not become cloying and a rather inept doctor is shown as uncertain rather than indifferent. Scenes of one family learning that their baby has Down's syndrome, are interspersed with comments from doctors and from a well selected range of families. The video is clearly based on the experiences, both rewarding and bitter, of parents and doctors.

Anyone looking for the perfectly correct method of breaking sad news will be disappointed and possibly irritated by the sequence of comments. There is a constant contradiction. One parent asks for hope, another for realism. A mother's criticism of an unnecessarily gloomy prognosis is followed by another family slowly coming to terms with terribly severe limitations: 'I'm learning things now, twenty years on, that I should have known from day one,' said the father. Within this simply made film there is a wealth of detail to provoke discussion and to encourage the viewer towards an ethical understanding of the problems of breaking such news. And part of the problem is that learned techniques are only of limited help. The most important element is the quality of the person giving the news and the care with which he or she responds to the family and continues to offer support and to teach acceptance. This close contact with families can be extremely wearing but, as one mother said, 'If you can't relate to the patients because it's going to hurt you, then you're in the wrong job'.

A copy of the handbook is meant to be given to every viewer. It is a useful complement to the 27-minute video, being a permanent record full of definite and practical information, sources of help and further discussion points. As a result of SOPHIE's work, many more parents should be able to say with one mother in the film: 'I can't think of anything more the hospital could have done to make it easier'.

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## The Foetus as Transplant Donor: Scientific, Social and Ethical Perspectives

Peter McCullagh, 215 pages, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, £25, 1987