

Book reviews

The Case of Leonid Plyushch

Edited by Tatyana Khodorovich.
Introduction by Peter Reddaway.
(Pp 152; £3.95)
C. Hurst & Co., London.

The success of the film of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* seems to be an indicator of a growing public awareness of the ambiguity of the concept of mental illness and of the potentially exploitative uses of psychiatric treatment. But whatever doubts may be felt about uses of psychiatry in the USA and in other western countries, the picture of Soviet psychiatry painted in *The Case of Leonid Plyushch* leaves one in no doubt about the extremes of such abuse of medical authority. Plyushch, a promising young mathematician with a particular interest in the history and psychology of games, was arrested in January 1972 on charges of anti-Soviet activity. His main 'crime' appears to have been his membership of the Initiative Group for the Defence of Human Rights in the USSR, a group of Soviet citizens committed to publicizing abuses of human rights in political trials and in correcting inaccurate accounts of these trials in the Soviet press. He was held in prison for a year before a trial was held. The court sat *in camera* and in the absence of the accused. Plyushch was found to be insane (although no expert witnesses of any kind were called) and was ordered to be 'sent for treatment in a special type of hospital'. The treatment consisted of being locked up, in grossly overcrowded and degrading conditions, in a ward for severely psychotic patients. In addition high doses of haloperidol, insulin and other drugs were administered. In these conditions Plyushch's mental and physical health showed signs of steady deterioration. Eventually, as a result of the courageous persistence of his wife and friends, international protests were mobilized to such an extent that the Soviet authorities

released him, allowing him to leave Russia with his family in 1976.

Such a bare catalogue of events, however, cannot convey the force of this book. The earliest parts of it contain a selection of letters which Plyushch wrote to his family and friends at a time when his lucidity was still unimpaired by drugs. They testify not only to his mental health, but to his lively intelligence, warmth and simple humanity. The reader has begun to feel that he knows the man a little, when the tone of the narrative changes and detailed accounts of his diagnosis and 'treatment' are given. Through the eyes of family and friends we see the changes in him, and we are left with a disturbing feeling of what the editor describes as a threat to 'the precious inner life of man'.

In a sense the book has a happy ending. On release, Plyushch is found to be physically exhausted but mentally well. His statement to a press conference is calm and committed. He remains a convinced Communist as well as an advocate for human rights. But in his closing words he reminds us - characteristically - not of his own suffering but of the plight of the many others still sentenced to insanity for their political beliefs. This book would be tragic enough as an isolated case history. But it is much more than this. It is about the corruption of the moral foundation of medicine and the cynical definition of health in terms of social utility. No society can afford to ignore its lessons.

A V CAMPBELL

Health Care: The Growing Dilemma

Robert Maxwell (Pp 75; £3.30)
McKinsey and Company, New York, 1975.

Value for Money in Health Services

Brian Abel-Smith (Pp 230; £2.25)
Heinemann, London, 1976.

Contemporary studies of allocation of resources in health care are reminiscent of nineteenth century maps of Africa. The details on the periphery are familiar to all but the vast interior is unknown. Into it disappear explorers as variously, sometimes as eccentrically motivated, as Speke, Livingstone and Burton. They go in as specialists, economists, epidemiologists, sociologists. They return somewhat less convinced. Health care, like Africa, is different. It is a field where the divining rod seems to have the edge over the pick and shovel.

The number of explorers is growing daily, impressively and sometimes confusingly. Among the academics, much information and not a few theories have been supplied by such writers as Michael Cooper and Alan Williams and by such different organizations as the Guy's Hospital Unit for the Study of Health Policy, the Office of Health Economics and the Nuffield Provincial Hospitals Trust. Government has also been busy, as the recent consultative documents from the Department of Health and Social Service and the Scottish and Welsh Offices amply demonstrate. To these ever-expanding oases of knowledge an international dimension is now given by the two publications under review.

Health Care: The Growing Dilemma is a McKinsey survey report on health needs and resources in western Europe, the USA and the USSR. In the nature of the case it says somewhat less about the last than about the West. Nor is it entirely new, being a second edition (originally published in 1974), with some additional statistical material expanded to cover Canada, Australia and Japan. It provides, however, an excellent introduction for the tourist