

Book reviews

Ethics in Emergency Medicine (2nd ed)

K V Iseron, A B Saunders and D Mathieu, Tucson, Arizona, Galen Press, 1995, 519 pages, \$39.95.

Major ethical dilemmas are fortunately relatively infrequent in the day-to-day running of accident and emergency departments which, although moving towards increasing shop-floor involvement of senior staff, are still predominantly serviced by junior doctors – Senior House Officers (SHOs). More minor problems, usually involving concerns regarding confidentiality and informed consent are much more common and often influenced by the nursing staff's understanding of custom and practice within the department.

This book, though written for the American market is a useful source of reference and guidance. Intended for a wide audience of those working in the pre-hospital and emergency setting, it addresses issues that affect paramedics, nurses and managers as well as medical staff. This is reflected in the contributors, of whom there are 72, over half of whom are from clinical rather than purely legal, ethical or philosophical backgrounds.

Divided essentially into three sections the book includes an introductory section, an extensive section dealing with case histories and relevant commentaries and a final section dealing with ethical statements pertaining to the various professional groups at whom the book is aimed.

The introductory section gives an overview of the particular difficulties that ethical issues cause in the emergency environment, highlighting the limited information, lack of time and urgency of action, which may lead to decision-making being more fraught. The chapters on the approach to ethical problems was

the most valuable and practically oriented, giving appropriate advice as to how a sensible and workable decision may be reached, even given the constraints of the inadequate time for information-gathering, reflection and discussion. The basic premise of this section is that a sound ethical decision can be made from basic principles and a simple method for doing this is clearly laid out.

The section containing cases and commentaries, would, I imagine, be used as an occasional reference but may be dipped into to consider the interesting cases that are presented. I was unclear as to whether the cases were real or hypothetical. Real cases with real outcomes would have added credibility. Some of the commentaries were unnecessarily detailed and wordy and some lacked sound practical advice – for example, where the decision is made to undertake detention, investigation and treatment against the patient's will. Implementation is always the real problem and this particular issue was not addressed. Despite the differences between the British and American legal systems and indeed between different laws in different states, this section remains of interest to those working in the UK, particularly to senior staff in accident and emergency. Hopefully the book will be used to plan guidelines for the various scenarios that might present, rather than (as would probably be the case) being consulted in retrospect to see whether the decision made was justifiable!

The final section may have been included for completeness but is generally irrelevant to British practice.

In conclusion I find this a useful, interesting and handy-sized volume which sets out important principles, provides stimulating reading, and could be effectively used to produce workable guidelines in an emergency department in this country. The

meaty middle section is best dipped into, as a tendency to over-lengthy discussion might prove tedious.

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Cancer Wars – How Politics Shapes What We Know and Don't Know about Cancer

R N Proctor, New York, USA, Basic Books, 1995, 356 pages, \$25.

I found reviewing this book an exacting task. It is densely packed with facts and passionate argument. Dr Proctor obviously feels deeply on the subject and has some important things to say but the detail can sometimes obscure them.

The book sets out to explore why cancer rates are rising in spite of massive spending on research into the disease. Dr Proctor calls his book "the political history of cancer" (he is a Professor of the History of Science at Pennsylvania State University). He feels that political action will provide an answer to the problem of cancer (although cancer is not one illness). His first chapter looks at early conceptions about cancer, he then examines the life and times of two "20th century advocates of the environmentalist view of cancer", and provides very readable accounts of the public lives and deeds of Wilhelm Hueper and Rachel Carson. Ethical issues loomed large for both these courageous individuals and a common thread begins to appear in these sections, ie the power of big industry and governments to suppress unwanted knowledge. The pressure that was put on doctors and scientists, who were sometimes employed by