

Book reviews

A Question of Quality? – Roads to Assurance in Medical Care

Edited by Gordon McLachlan

(Pp 288, £9.00)

Published for the Nuffield Provincial Hospitals Trust by the Oxford University Press, 1976.

Some may be surprised to find a review in the *Journal of medical ethics* of a book which is concerned with methods of assuring high quality of medical care, particularly in our own National Health Service. Yet for doctors not to be concerned with the quality of care which they provide and not to be constantly on the look out for any practices which fall below the best standards is surely a breach of the deepest responsibility of all doctors, to justify to the full the trust which his patients place in him. We are not concerned in this matter with acute and perplexing alternative choices of action, but just with the constant grinding responsibility of being good at our job, and being aware of the constant likelihood that because of a variety of incursions of pride, envy and sloth, we may be kept from doing our best for our patients.

Ethical issues are referred to only indirectly in this book. They can be detected in the reiteration of clinicians' sensitivity to critical reviews of their activities which are often dismissed or ignored as manifestations of bureaucratic interference, their vigorous defence of their clinical independence, their slowness to act on clear quantitative evidence of inadequacy, as for instance in some chemical laboratories where low levels of accuracy persist despite their patent dangers. The reader will often find himself having to distinguish between effects of ignorance and sin. It is apparent, for instance, that many clinicians find it difficult to understand statistical evidence of poor performance when presented with a computer output. But is it alright if they dismiss such evidence as irrelevant rather than seeking enlightenment about its

meaning for them? This book is primarily concerned with practical techniques for quantitative assessment of medical practice, but it does provide subtle evidence that low standards may as often be due to impairment of conscientiousness as to impaired competence.

CHARLES FLETCHER

Medicines; A Guide for Everybody

Peter Parish

(Pp 453, £1.50)

Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1976.

As doctors we have been very reluctant to wash our dirty linen in public, and so the public has sometimes concluded that we don't wash it at all. We particularly dislike inspection of the standard of our laundry when treatment is in question. Cries of 'clinical judgment' are raised, and the inspectors falter and fall back, murmuring their apologies. But whether we like it or not, we have to face that this is changing and the public is now much more insistent in its questions. How good are these drugs? What exactly do they do? How much does my doctor know about alternatives? How can we decide which to use? The questioning mood is seen in media comment (and the interest it arouses), complaints to MPs, discussion in the surgery, attempted legislation in the House of Commons. So it is hardly surprising to meet, prompt on cue, this bold and authoritative book, which aims to explain in simple language for the ordinary reader what drugs actually do. As both an experienced general practitioner and a learned research worker on the use of drugs, Dr Parish is just the sort of objective insider that professions so seldom seem to produce, but which the public desperately needs. In many ways it is a revolutionary enterprise, and if read well, cannot help but change the style of medical practice in Britain in the next few years.

The book has three main parts. The first is a general introduction to the principles of drug use – their administration, absorption and fate – and has some very helpful advice about pregnancy, children and drivers. There is also here a nicely balanced chapter on drug dependency, and a series of references on over-the-counter preparations. This was too short for my liking, but pointed forward to the other two parts, the last of which is in the form of a popular pharmacopoeia, and is well cross referenced. The middle part, however, is the real meat of the book. Here the author describes groups of drugs according to their use, starting with hypnotics and sedatives, on which he has done much central work. Much of this is in the best style of medical journalism, with concise but careful explanations of what can be expected of modern treatment, and other ways in which we may, as patients, approach our problems. The thorny topics of slimming, tonics, sleeping tablets and the common cold are skilfully written, and Dr Parish seems careful not to so simplify as to mystify: indeed, often his explanations, like that of alpha and beta blockade, would be useful for professional reading.

There must, however, be some objections to what he is trying to do, and in his introduction he deals with the accusations that he will create anxiety, or a more 'demanding' attitude, or more confusion. Those doctors who do not agree with his defence must have an inflated view of their own therapeutic effectiveness. However, there are two further specific questions that worry me. One is the didactic tone of some of his writing, which leaves the physician little room for manoeuvre if he happens to take a different attitude, and the other is the vexed problem of how, how well, and how often this volume will be brought up to date. To take the latter point first, Dr Parish's nine long pages on the contraceptive pill are fraught with