

coherent philosophy with which to conceptualise illness and the treatment of ill people.

JAMES MATHERS

Quest for Excellence in Medical Education

Sir George Pickering, published for Nuffield Provincial Hospital Trust by Oxford University Press, 1978. 102pp, £4.50.

Medical Education and Medical Care, a Scottish - American Symposium, Gordon McLachlan (Editor), published for Nuffield Provincial Hospital Trust by Oxford University Press, 1977, 215pp, £6.00.

Sir George's recent death deprived us of one of the major figures in post-war British medicine. One of his outstanding qualities was the balance of his interest and skill in the three separate areas of clinical medicine, research and education. He combined these interests to an amazing and some would say unique degree, and it is this which makes the prospect of his book fascinating. There have been a large number of pressures on medical education in the last decade. Graduate output has increased. The scientific knowledge required as a background to practice has widened. New schools with new ideas have been formed, and the demands and standards of post-graduate practice have altered. There have been other challenges to expansion, however, most recently the stark economic reality of the enormous expense of medical education compared with other university courses. Medical unemployment could be a reality within a few years. Specialist and high technology medicine has been challenged at all levels, certainly by the renewed interest amongst medical students in general practice. All this should mean that medical educators are thinking hard about their task, and should be questioning the assumptions of their predecessors. Sometimes this seems to be the case, but more often the debate is confined to parochial issues, power struggles, and the defence of the status quo, ancient or modern. Sir George, asked by the Nuffield Provincial Hospital's Trust after the 1973 Pembroke Conference to survey medical education in general has avoided all the temptations of narrow thinking and has provided something

that was desperately needed, a short and well written piece which asks sharp and perceptive questions, and comes up with concise but deep and well-reasoned answers. Unlike the representatives of more recent reports on medical education, he visited the institutions he concentrates on and saw what they were actually doing, not what they said they were doing. As a piece of work it seems a model of its kind.

What he found is more alarming. Medical students are brighter and keener than ever before, and yet within the schools he often found them bored, felling they were 'data banks' and asked to cram current dogma rather than develop their own minds by using their observations and learning to achieve a synthesis of their own. This runs counter to the clear need of the undergraduate to learn how to learn in order to face a professional life full of changes in emphasis and practice. The idea that a graduating doctor should be immediately able to practise in any field, although implied in the Medical Acts, Sir George exposes for the nonsense it is; but he shows that this still has not led teachers or examiners to respond suitably. Now that postgraduate education is a reality for all branches of medicine, specialist teaching should be given at *this* point, and yet again he points out how examinations geared to reduce the chance of a badly trained doctor slipping through, and thus keeping up standards in general, are equally discouraging to original thought, literacy and scholarship and provided dogma not education as their pabulum. These and other ideas form challenging reading which should be required for anyone who teaches in medicine at any level.

The stimulation of Sir George's short piece (and why was it not in paperback?) contrasts with the broad and leisurely symposium on the contributions which Scotland and the USA have made to medical education and care, and the problems that these two countries face in common or in contrast. For anyone interested in history this is pleasant and useful reading, but it failed, as perhaps so many symposia fail, to have a cutting edge which helps us to shape the future. Several of the contributors were first rate, but what they had to say seemed to me curiously blunted. I am sure great benefits were derived by those who attended, but I feel the Trust spends

its money better for the reader who is asking an individual to come up with a definitive statement, based on observation, like Sir George's, rather than a wide series of the type of survey that we find in this symposium. Which having been said, we should pay tribute to the work that the Trust has done in so many unusual but important and influential areas of medical education. May its foresight and generosity continue to enlighten us!

ROGER HIGGS

The End of an Age of Optimism in Medical Science in Retrospect and Prospect

Colin Dollery
Rock Carling Monograph, The Nuffield Provincial Hospitals Trust, 1978, 95 pp, £3.75.

The last decade has witnessed a wave of criticism of western medicine and its relationship with science. Two of the most imaginative and radical attacks have come from previous Rock Carling Fellows, Cochrane in 1972 and McKeown in 1976. Their monographs have been much debated and have rapidly become medical classics. Dollery has therefore a difficult tradition to follow in reviewing the role of science in medicine, in part as an answer to the critics.

He begins with a useful survey of the main criticisms which he draws up in the form of a list of charges against medical science. Apart from medical conspiracy, he finds that they each have some substance, but have been greatly exaggerated. From this he concludes that taken overall, science has served medicine well and the acknowledged deficiencies, though not unimportant, are peripheral. It is significant that the only charge judged unequivocally as guilty is medical 'gullibility' - accepting new procedures and drugs, which implies the need for an even greater application of traditional scientific method. The types of problem facing medicine are seen as basically unchanged and will be best remedied by more of the same approach, with some additions and modifications to allow for altered circumstances. The remaining chapters are mainly concerned with more detailed justification and working through of this theme, especially concerning the organisational arrangements for research.