Book reviews

Stress and health: issues in research methodology Eds: Kasl SV, Cooper CL. (Pp 321; £28.50) Chichester, New York, Brisbane, Toronto, Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 1987.

Issues related to research in health and stress must be some of the most controversial, often leading to total rejection of all that is written. Thus, the title of this book is likely to attract attention, particularly when it is part of an established series and has a distinguished list of contributors. In a subject area where there is lack of clarity of definitions, the diversity of approach from different disciplines, the comprehensive reviews and detailed and extensive references in this book are most welcome.

The two opening chapters reviewing the disciplinary perspectives—epidemiology and health psychology—provide an excellent introduction. They will be of value to all who are interested in stress and illness.

The rest of the book will be relevant mainly to those involved in research. The next three chapters on methodological issues, bias, research design, data analysis and evaluation are detailed and practical, and could well be regarded as required reading for those contemplating research in this field. The second part of the book is more specific and, although general issues may be inferred, will be most useful to those working in the selected topic areas—family and stress, social support, work environment, type A behaviour pattern and coping. While these chapters are valuable they give the appearance of an unrelated collection of papers, and this is not resolved by the final chapter.

While this concluding chapter does reflect on past difficulties and present dilemmas and indicates future directions, I would have liked to see this expanded to make full use of the earlier contributions. While it is unrealistic to expect a synthesis of the disciplinary approaches, I would hope that in a future revision of this volume this final section could go some way to achieving this.

JIM MCEWEN

*Reader, Department of Community Medicine,
King's College Hospital Medical School.*

Farrant, Jill Russell (Pp 74; £3.50) Institute of Education, University of London, 1986.

At the time of the Health Education Council's recent demise, different expectations of what it could achieve were evident. For governments pressed to take action on public health, a health education campaign is an easy option, with the additional bonus of publicity for ambitious ministers. In contrast, health educators are attracted by the possibilities for demystifying medicine, and public health professionals are interested in improving morbidity and mortality by whatever means are to hand.

Farrant and Russell's book presents some interesting material concerning the HEC's production of a booklet on preventing coronary heart disease in 1983. They criticise the HEC for dealing dogmatically with the scientific issues, playing down the role of psychosocial stress, and concentrating its message on personal risk factors for CHD. Commissioned by the HEC to pretest the booklet, the authors interviewed a sample of seven attenders at a health centre in South Wales and 14 passengers on an Inter-City train on which they happened to be travelling. Their respondents were hostile to advice about smoking and diet, preferring to blame stress and environmental pollution for heart attacks. Sceptical of expert knowledge, they wanted a balanced view rather than a hard sell. In place of the conventional prescriptive approach to health education Farrant and Russell advocate a counter-hegemonic strategy, using material relevant to the concerns of the target audience and giving more attention to social determinants of coronary heart disease.

Other surveys of health beliefs based on more representative samples have generally found closer agreement between professional and lay views on how heart attacks can be prevented. Though intervention programmes based on conventional risk factors for coronary heart disease have often yielded disappointing results, it is not obvious that a campaign based on lay perspectives on health would be any more effective in improving health outcome than the conventional 'look after yourself' approach, still less that it would change people's political attitudes. In the current debate on AIDS prevention, ideological positions are curiously reversed: progressives concur with concentrating on reducing personal risk by safe sex while conservatives see an opportunity for a broader campaign on sexual mores. Neither health education, nor the authors' views on how it should be conducted, lend themselves well to a prescriptive approach.

P M McKEIGUE

*Wellcome Research Fellow in Clinical Epidemiology,
University College London.*

The politics of health information. Beating Heart Disease as a case study of Health Education Council Publications. Bedford Way Paper 28. Eds: Wendy