BOOK REVIEWS

Health Inequalities in European Countries. Ed John Fox. (Pp 414; £42.00) Gower, Aldershot, 1989. ISBN 0556-05497-3.

A series of papers prepared (and further revised) for workshops held under the aegis of the European Science Foundation has been edited by John Fox into four sections dealing with background, mortality, morbidity, and explanations. Differentials are broadly interpreted and include not only social but also geographical, height, and gender differences; social variables include housing tenure, education, and mobility, in addition to social class and occupation.

English contributions account for over half of the papers and underline the powerful databases available within this country, with fresh instalments from the Longitudinal Study on Cancer Survival (although the shortness of the period of follow up impairs the analysis); the National Child Development Study, exploring differences in morbidity in relation to social mobility between birth and age 23; and the General Household Survey, where Arber delves deeper to explore gender and class inequalities in long standing illness.

Blaxter's attempt to explore differences in chronic illness across a number of countries, using a variety of measures of social circumstances, is largely defeated by variations not only in the definitional basis of those variables but also by the "different meaning in different cultures" of the social circumstances, which in turn affects those health measures which are in part socially defined.

Mortality fares somewhat better—since death provides an event which may be unequivocally interpreted (at least at all causes level). Data from France, Hungary, and Sweden, as well as England and Wales, provide the basis for an admirably clear exposition (by Hart) of the historical facts in respect of gender differences and the social influences which may explain these, leading to the conclusion that "women's distinctive advantage in longevity" may well be on the wane. Examination of information from six countries (by Valkonen) produces a consistent pattern of reduction in mortality per extra year of education for men but not for women, with trend data showing an apparent increase in inequality in England and Wales over a five year time interval, decreases occurring only for neoplasms and accidents in the restricted range of causes considered.

Leclerc's attempt to compare mortality in unskilled workers compared with all occupied men, using linked cohort data from five European countries, is however impeded by difficulty in finding comparable groups of workers in these countries, the results being particularly sensitive to the proportion of people who were not classified to a social class.

Explanatory chapters exemplify the difficulties in penetrating beyond the observation of inequalities. McIntyre sets herself the challenging task of reviewing the role of health services; lack of relevant and comparable data precludes analysis and few studies (none in this volume) have attempted

to disentangle the influence of health care from other relevant circumstances. The role of psychosocial factors in contributing to social differentials in health is emphasised in a theoretical contribution by Antonovsky. Empirical evidence is slow to emerge but two papers make a contribution: using data from a study of metal industry employees in Finland, with five year follow up, Hasan details the association between a stress symptoms score and chronic illness (after controlling for a range of risk factors) and concludes that "non-satisfied needs lead to psychological states, activities and behaviour which increase the probability of disease and death", while Siegrist draws on West German data to explore some of the sociological concepts, basing this on psychosocial features of different social groups and their role in explaining differences in some aspects of health.

This volume illustrates the difficulties encountered in trying to carry out intracountry analysis, efforts to compare across European countries being less successful than those which analyse data for single countries. McIntyre's concluding words serve to sum up the main messages emerging: a need for better national statistics on the distribution of health care and of various health "outputs", and for further study of the circumstances which could remedy inequalities in health. Lack of comparability in definition and more importantly in culture do not suggest however that rapid progress in the harmonisation of European statistics is to be expected, while further explanation of the processes involved must rely on more intensive enquiries which are not dependent on these national databases.

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From Conception to Birth: Epidemiology of Prenatal Development. Kline JK, Stein Z, Susser M. (Pp 433; £42.50.) Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-504286-7.

This is a "state of the art" account of our knowledge of the epidemiology of prenatal development written by a team whose overall expertise in the field is unrivalled. It is an exciting book unfolding as it does the natural history and progress of fertilised ova, their chances of implantation, development into embryos, fetuses, and viable births, and the influences which affect their chance of normal development and healthy survival.

The publications on the epidemiology of each developmental stage are critically reviewed, including those on such fascinating questions as the chances of survival, and the sex ratio at different phases after conception. Particularly outstanding sections include those on chromosomal abnormalities: frequency, type, prenatal survival, and possible causes; and the interpretation of the literature on genetic and environmental influences on fetal growth rate, both in the developed and developing world. As well there are clear expositions of the difficult areas of preterm delivery and risk factors; the effects of aging on fecundity, fertility, and outcome; and the effects of birth order. Of particular interest to the public health

physician will be the very practical sections on the surveillance and monitoring of reproductive outcomes to detect possible adverse effects of the physical environment.

The style is not always easy to follow, for difficult theoretical questions are posed, many of which have no clear answers. Nevertheless the synthesis of what knowledge we have is superbly done, the bibliography is excellent, and it is a book which can be read with enjoyment from cover to cover. As well as providing important information for those working in the public health field, it will appeal to developmental biologists, reproductive epidemiologists, and to many lay readers.

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Legal Issues in Human Reproduction. Ed Sheila Maclean. (Pp 238; £14.95.) Dartmouth Publishing, Aldershot, 1990. ISBN 1-85521-008-8.

Rapid developments in reproductive technology have spawned a plethora of problems for lawyers. Many of these problems arise from the inadequacy of existing legal technical concepts when faced with the novel situations created by such advances as embryo donation ("Who is mother?"). Others are of a fundamentally policy based nature, such as the question of whether surrogacy should be an entirely illegal transaction.

In this extremely readable collection of essays, Sheila Maclean has assembled a number of papers which address these manifold medicolegal issues. The contributors are, to a very large degree, of similar mind. There is a strong commitment to the notion of individual self determination, and to the control by women over their reproductive capacity. This issue is explored from a fresh angle, for example, by Rebecca Cook in her analysis of the extent to which international human rights law seeks to enhance the reproductive health of women. There is, of course, substantial theoretical protection, but much of it is lip service and bears little possibility of translation into concrete action at the national level, particularly in the Third World. Human rights figure prominently, too, in Christopher Heginbotham's essay on sterilisation and the mentally handicapped. Doctors and social workers may well be surprised at the caution which lawyers have counselled in this awkward area. Indeed, some legal commentators are of the view that the courts have been too ready to endorse medical decisions here.

It could be argued that many of the concerns in this book are "luxury" ones, and that a far more pressing problem is that of the ecological disaster which unrestrained reproduction threatens in so many parts of the world. In advanced societies, however, it is undeniable that there are acute legal problems associated with the scientific cross roads at which we stand, and for an up to date survey of these problems this book fulfills a most useful function.

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