

Book reviews

The healing arts. By Ted Kaptchuk and Michael Croucher. (Pp. 175; £5-25) BBC Publications, 1986.

This is the book of the BBC TV series, which I missed. It describes itself as “a journey through the faces of medicine” and asks “fundamental questions such as: What is illness? What effect does the mind have on the body? Why do placebos so often work?—interesting enough questions but rather ambitious, even off-putting, for a short popular book that also aims to describe the diversity of systems of medical practice. The descriptive parts of the book are excellent, giving examples of the practice and history of Ayurveda, Unani, acupuncture, homeopathy, and many more medical systems through case histories and direct observation.

Persistent themes are that alternative practitioners gather their patients from scientific medicine’s failures and that the strengths of other medical systems are their human qualities. The book acknowledges the null hypothesis as scientific medicine’s greatest strength, allowing change in both practice and theory, but it casts the scientific doctor in the role of an uncaring technician who, having probed an organ or system, withdraws without understanding the patient and his illness. Balint is not on the recommended reading list, and I get the feeling that the authors are out of touch with the amount of “whole person medicine” training received and practised by primary care doctors in this and other countries. An “open clinic” (run by one of the authors) is described which integrates the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of different therapists. A new patient can expect to be seen by seven staff on the first day (a “scientific” doctor, psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker, physiotherapist, a ‘yin-yang’ doctor, and a masseuse) —a sledge-hammer approach for most people’s problems?

But the book ducks the main issue: by which standard(s) should an alternative therapy be judged? The authors say that each system is independent and should not be viewed within the context of another system. Yet they do just this, citing examples of double-blind, randomised, controlled trials in the field of phytothérapie, as the French call herbalism, comparisons with historical controls in assessing ‘guided imagery’ for cancer patients, and a before and after comparison of pain scores for the open clinic patients, presumably to make it all more ‘believable’ to a lay audience. But the examples are too brief to be convincing. The book is at its worst when grappling

with a ‘fundamental question’ but these do not dominate. It is a quick and worthwhile read for both doctors and patients.

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Current topics in rheumatology: epidemiology of the rheumatic diseases. Edited by RC Lawrence and LE Shulman, (Pp 381) Gower Medical Publishing, 1985.

This monograph records the proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on the Epidemiology of the Rheumatic Diseases and represents a definitive statement on the body of knowledge on this broad topic at the time the conference was held. It contains 56 papers by epidemiologists and rheumatologists and is divided, after a brief introduction, into three broad categories: the epidemiology of various disease entities (including spondyloarthropathies, infectious, rheumatoid, juvenile, and degenerative arthritides, connective tissue disorders, and microcrystalline diseases), the epidemiological aspects of disability medicine, and the use of multi-institutional research strategies.

The contributions relating to theoretical epidemiology are basic and, although providing a useful introduction to the non-epidemiologist, are probably superfluous to the majority of readers of such a book. The sections on the various diseases, however, provide useful summaries of their descriptive and analytical epidemiology. The concise review of the epidemiology of rheumatoid arthritis and the demarcation of priority areas for future research is particularly useful, while the papers on systemic sclerosis and dermatomyositis/polymyositis illustrate well the difficulties of carrying out epidemiological studies of uncommon, poorly defined conditions. Inevitably, some of the sections (most notably those of Lyme disease and ankylosing spondylitis) have been outdated by subsequent findings relating to the aetiology and pathogenesis of these conditions, but the bulk of the text has withstood the test of time.

This book may not be of wide interest to clinical epidemiologists or rheumatologists but it will be essential reading for those involved in research at the interface between the two disciplines.

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