Book reviews

Global geocancerology. Edited by G Mervyn Howe. (Pp 360; £75.00) Churchill Livingstone, 1986.

Readers who are not put off by the title will find a medley of contributions, mainly from geographers but also from epidemiologists, on aspects of the geography of cancer in some 40 countries. On the evidence of this work the geographical fraternity have a few things to teach the epidemiologists, but they also have much to learn.

The overwhelming impression is of imbalance. To state that no aetiological factors are well established for nasal cancer and that a causal relation between the habit of cigarette smoking and lung cancer is now "reasonably well established" seems excessively cautious alongside the bold assertion that nasopharyngeal carcinoma is usually associated with the consumption of salted fish and that the incidence of cancer of the prostate is known to be increased after long-term occupational exposure to cadmium. Complex statistical analyses are presented with rather vague conclusions ("lung cancer was urban orientated but not urban-industrial"), while there is little or no mention of important observations such as the geographical cluster of nasal cancers in Northamptonshire which first led to the discovery of a hazard in the boot and shoe industry.

Moreover the standard of presentation is poor for a book of this price. One of the contributions from a non-English speaker has been translated in schoolboy fashion, and there are several potentially misleading typographical errors.

A few of the individual contributions stand out from the rest, but they do not redeem the book to the extent that one could recommend purchase.

I wonder if geoneoplasiology might have more of a ring to it.

DAVID COGGON

*MRC Environmental Epidemiology Unit,
Southampton.*

The worst accident in the world—Chernobyl; the end of the nuclear dream. By Nigel Hawkes, Geoffrey Lean, David Leigh, Robin McKie, Peter Pringle, and Andrew Wilson. (Pp 246; £2.95.) Pan books, 1986.

You would expect a team of six professional journalists who have, individually, already shown their hands on matters nuclear to have an easy job to prove the subtitle of this book.

They trace the growth of nuclear power since the war to a moral imperative which inspired physicists and politicians to pursue the peaceful use of fission

and remind us that the world now has 375 operational reactors with 156 under construction.

Their work is remarkable for the speed with which information was collated many weeks before the Russians presented their analysis to the IAEA in Vienna. The Soviet experts are relying on computer modelling to understand the vital last ten seconds and cannot be certain that a steam-zirconium interaction led to a hydrogen explosion until the disrupted core can be properly examined. Even so, the event chain postulated in this book is probably not far from the truth.

Much more problematic are the predictions of long term health consequences. The authors describe some of the reasoning behind the current revaluation of the Japanese bomb dose data, on which ICRP risk estimates are largely based. They go on, however, to favour a view that a subsection of the population might be particularly sensitive to radiation. No evidence has been provided to justify this pessimistic claim.

The book rightly emphasises the influence of human energy on technology, whatever its nature or sophistication. Error and panic, ingenuity and heroism all play their parts. This story leaves the reader with an abiding admiration and compassion for the Russian people, particularly those who, knowingly, risked their lives to prevent fire from involving the adjoining reactor.

The authors do not persuade me that Chernobyl has ended the nuclear dream. Of course it should never have happened, but for epidemiologists it is surely a beginning—an opportunity to refine radiation risk estimates as the world approaches a 21st century denuded of fossil fuel reserves but with a burgeoning population ever hungrier for energy.

Those with a general interest in environmental health issues will find this book absorbing and informative, but the specialist will turn elsewhere as accurate detail and objective opinion evolve.

JEFF MORGAN

*Environmental & Medical Sciences Division,
Harwell Laboratory,
UK Atomic Energy Authority.*

Drug problems—where to get help. (Pp 155; £1.95.) SCODA National Directory, 1986.

The increase in scale of drug abuse in the United Kingdom has been matched only by the number of television programmes, radio programmes, books, and articles on the subject.

This book is produced jointly by the BBC Drugwatch team and SCODA (Standing Conference