Book reviews

with the literature on AIDS the book has some value, but the epidemiological aspects will receive more up-to-date coverage as new reviews appear in the medical press.

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A picture of health Department of Community Medicine, Central Birmingham HA, Birmingham B15 2TZ. (Pp 116; £6.95) 1987.

This type of report is now being produced by a number of active, well motivated departments of community medicine. Many people have lamented the loss of the MOH's annual report in recent years, and a number of the 1980s new varieties have been produced. One of the difficulties seems to have been in deciding the target readers for such reports. The general public, fellow professionals, other agencies, health authority members or some mix of these groups have all been suggested and to some extent targeted by different departments.

This report is an excellent attempt to show something of the state of health of the district population for both information and planning purposes. My main criticism is that it contains almost too much detail, particularly tables, charts and figures, and in some places cross referencing could be improved. There also seems to be a reluctance to state conclusions and give some preferences from a community medicine perspective, although it is understood that this was not the main purpose of the document. However, on the whole, this is an excellent first new style report which is likely to become a regular requirement in all districts. Those involved in the compilation of this wealth of information should be congratulated.

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Health and illness. The lay perspective. Michael Calnan (Pp 198, £7.95) London: Tavistock 1987.

Why do some people appear to behave more 'rationally' than others with respect to safeguarding their health? Why do some patients comply with expert advice more readily than others? These

questions are not new, nor is the idea that such behaviour may be associated with social class. The challenge is how we go about explaining patterns of health-related behaviour and understanding their implications for the organisation of effective health care initiatives.

In this book Michael Calnan provides a valuable contribution to the goal of understanding health-related behaviour by setting out a framework within which to examine the ways in which lay health beliefs and perspectives, linked to the wider social structure via social class membership, might influence various types of health and illness behaviour. Calnan makes good use of evidence from previous studies and theoretical writings, but most of the substance of the book is drawn from the accounts given to him by 60 women in research interviews covering such items as their definitions of health and illness, their perceptions of vulnerability to disease, and the degree to which they see themselves as having control over their own health.

The rationale for this approach rests on the assumption that lay health beliefs contain more than just an imperfect understanding of medical 'facts'. This assumption is borne out in the complex, and sometimes unexpected, beliefs which are described in this book. Why should working class women appear to dismiss ideas about the relation between inequalities in health and income or occupation, and how does this relate to their scepticism regarding the possibilities of preventing disease? Why should the respondents generally find it easier to define and discuss the idea of 'health maintenance' than that of 'illness prevention'? Does this tell us something about the appropriate use of language and ideas in health education?

Calnan avoids the temptation of looking too hard for simple connections between beliefs and behaviour. Instead, he develops models which strive to encompass the multidimensional character of the sets of beliefs he describes, allowing room not only for personal perspectives but also for the contribution of the medical opinions and sociopolitical ideologies which contribute to lay health perspectives.

For readers who are looking for conclusive statements, the book may prove frustrating, nor is it intended as a guide to how individual patients might be expected to behave. What this book does offer is some rich food for thought for anyone engaged in the design of health care programmes, preventive or not, where the participation and cooperation of the population targeted is crucial to a successful outcome.

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