

Book reviews

The AIDS virus: forecasting its impact. (Pp 59; £1.00) London: Office of Health Economics, 1986.

Future trends in AIDS: Report of a seminar organised by DHSS. (Pp 114; £6.70) London: HMSO, 1987.

“The AIDS virus” provides a brief but comprehensive background to the problem of AIDS, with useful tables bringing together information from different countries. Since December 1986 the number of cases has increased and the place of zidovudine (formerly AZT) has become more clearly established, but despite these shortcomings this book is one of the best summaries for any student who has not kept up with the Journals.

“Future trends in AIDS” is more interesting. Reports of seminars often make dull reading but this is an exception. It is a well presented and fascinating series of essays on the epidemiology of AIDS. As Professor Healy comments in his summing up, we do not yet have the information to assess the reliability of long term forecasting models. Current estimates of the mean incubation period of AIDS are of the order of eight years or more, so we do not yet know what proportion of HIV-positive people will develop AIDS. Numerically in the UK the main epidemics are in male homosexuals and intravenous drug abusers, and we have a great deal of information about both groups. But when it comes to the heterosexual population, we know almost nothing. Only five cases appear to have acquired the infection heterosexually in the UK and they had all had intercourse with a partner in a high risk group, and in one case also shared razors with drug abusers. HIV-positive people appear to be particularly liable to pass on the infection early in the disease and in the latest phase, so the risks of contact will vary over time as well as with actual sexual habits. Clearly we have a lot to learn about AIDS.

“Future trends in AIDS” brings together many relevant facts and also a number of theories which are useful in defining present policy. Some will need amending as our understanding of this disease improves, but for the moment this is an invaluable source book for those who have to advise the public on this horrendous epidemic.

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Domiciliary Terminal Care. A Handbook for Doctors and Nurses. Ed: Derek Doyle (Pp 130; £6.95) Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone, 1987

Despite the fact that about two thirds now die either in hospital or hospice, most people spend a substantial part of their final illness at home under the care of their family, general practitioner and district nurse. As this excellent book points out it is therefore at home that most of the problems and challenges are met. It falls to the members of the primary health care team to anticipate some of these problems and treat others. It is to them that relatives will turn, not only whilst the patient is still alive, but also in the months and years which follow.

To provide effective care for a dying patient and close support to the family is one of the most rewarding aspects of family practice. To do this properly now demands considerable technical knowledge and skill. This book therefore is very welcome because it provides vital information in an authoritative, concise and sensible way. Especially valuable are the sections on pain control, symptom control and emergencies in terminal care. The lessons learned from the hospice movement are essential to primary care, and an understanding of how pain can be effectively relieved is one of the most important contributions. Every General Practitioner and trainee must know about these techniques. The book describes them excellently. Much else is also good—the discussions on communication, team work, spiritual needs and bereavement. If anything, more could have been written about understanding and coping with the needs of the relatives and immediate carers as in the end it is they who carry the complete burden. However, the handbook can be strongly commended and every practice should have a copy on its bookshelves.

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Progress in Child Health: Volume 3. Ed: Macfarlane JA. (Pp 237; £20.00) Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone, 1987

A reasonable complaint at about the time the Court Report on the future of child health services was published was the lack of a literature which described the contemporary content and skills of these services. Available textbooks tended to be mechanistic in flavour and often failed to convey the complexity and need for evolutionary change that are features of