

Book reviews

It is impossible to be fully comprehensive on a subject so broad, that has exercised man's mind for as long as he has had time to ponder his health, and to be comprehensive would lead to excessive repetition. However, it is important to appreciate that this guide is not comprehensive: the clipped language Dr Alderson uses might suggest to the new student of health statistics that one man wrote a good review (recently), another made a useful observation (a century or two previously), that 16 countries routinely report this particular statistic and that's that. The blend of original references and recent reviews demands careful reading. There are many references but they are not indexed and the subject index is weak: for example how in the book do you find anywhere (the survey of) Handicapped and impaired in Great Britain (although Harris AI, 1971 is referenced)?

There is a certain degree of arbitrariness as to where extracts, quotations and references appear, for example under background, method, classification or use. Again there is a degree of arbitrariness with respect to the placing of some methodological considerations, like sample size and sensitivity and specificity, in Chapter 10 on health surveys. While this may be the most appropriate chapter, it could be interpreted that these issues do not apply to other statistics and other information gathering systems. There is necessarily a degree of overlap in the final chapter, entitled Monitoring the public health, with sections of preceding chapters.

While the author's knowledge of health statistics is enormous, this text is not encyclopaedic. It may serve as an introduction to the thoughtful student, provided he realises what could lie behind each neat matter of fact sentence. It will be welcomed by many who work with health statistics or who teach health statistics, for its many references, and because it is more comprehensive than most books on the subject.

R WEST

*Department of Epidemiology and Community Medicine
University of Wales College of Medicine*

Consumer and market research in health care.

Mike Luck, Barbara Lawrence, Bob Pocock, Kevin Reilly. (Pp 247; £22.50) London: Chapman and Hall, 1989.

Finding out what the "consumer" thinks of health services is not as easy as it sounds. There are many problems of a technical nature in choosing and applying appropriate methods of gathering consumer opinion. At least, though, many of the problems are well understood and some solutions are available, often borrowed from market research in the commercial field. This book explains how some of this

expertise can be deployed effectively in the health care context. Community physicians, health promotion researchers and others who have undertaken survey work will find little here that is methodologically new, but they will find a clear, open and practical account of the way a programme of survey research was conceived and implemented.

The real interest of the book lies in the way it reveals how the "new philosophy" of consumerism was worked out in one District Health Authority. The driving force was an alliance of DHA chair and senior management, backed by additional funding and support from the Regional Health Promotion group. A team from Aston University was commissioned to develop and implement a market research programme of several discrete projects. The balance of work reflects this backing: most of it deals with health knowledge, attitudes and behaviour and seems primarily concerned with information Health Promotion programmes. This seems to have been received enthusiastically by those directly involved with Health Promotion work (their comments, and those of several other managers, form one of the chapters).

Rather less of the work concerns the perceptions of clients (and carers) of the health services they received (or would like). What was done seems to have been competent, but reading between the lines its practical impact seems to have been rather small, and not well received in some cases by the staff actually delivering the care. This is perhaps not surprising because they were not involved in the studies until the end: a consequence, one supposes, of the way the programme was conceived and organised.

The contribution of the "consumer" themselves to the design of the programme seems to have been marginal, too. The Community Health Council had a voice, as is proper, but its impact does not show. It is gratifying to see, however, that the market research team used open ended, unstructured approaches as well as closed questionnaires, which at least gives some scope for users to influence the topics on the research agenda.

The work is refreshingly clearly written and full of practical guidance. Its main interest, however, lies in the light it sheds on the interplay of different forces—managers, university research team, health promotion officers and so on—and how these shape the potentially radical concept of consumer power into a programme of action. The result, as revealed by this book, has been interesting and possibly valuable, but hardly radical. Recommended reading for anyone involved in "consumer" initiatives in the National Health Service.

LYN JONES

*Department of Community Medicine
University of Edinburgh*