BOOK REVIEWS

Request for reviewers of books

Are you someone who wonders why you are never asked to review books for this journal? The answer is simple. As book review editor, I rely on my own network of contacts to seek out reviewers. If you would like to review a book occasionally, or would like to nominate a colleague, please write, mentioning your main interests, to:

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New entrants to epidemiology or the other disciplines of community health, both in the United Kingdom and other countries, are most welcome to join our list of book reviewers.

GERRY FOWKES

Safer Childbirth. A Critical History of Maternity Care. Marjorie Tew (Pp 298; £14.95) Chapman and Hall, 1990. ISBN 0-412-337401

Safer childbirth represents the culmination of Marjorie Tew's pioneering contribution to the debate over home versus hospital birth. In search of epidemiological exercises for her students in the mid-seventies, Tew carried out a preliminary analysis of birth data; surprised, she failed to find the basis of the obstetricians' claim to safer childbirth, that is, the alleged link between decreasing perinatal mortality rate and the decreasing occurrence of home birth. Further examination of the initial data and later reanalysis of data from the British Births Survey 1970 lead her to the "inescapable conclusion" that a relationship between the two did exist, but in the other direction to that portrayed by members of the medical profession. Safer childbirth, she concluded, was childbirth out of hospital. Professional hassles over the continuation and publication of her work only convinced her more of the correctness of her findings, although many would still argue that the situation remains "not proven". In the book, Tew extends her critique of obstetrics to include an examination of the rational basis for a number of birth related practices such as birth position, fetal monitoring, ultrasound, and so on, concluding that these too are routines built upon little sound scientific basis.

Seeking to place into context her contemporary research, Tew produces in the first half of the book a history of the development of childbirth in Britain, dealing

both with the place of birth and also the attendant. The demise of the power of the midwife, and the rise in control of the birth situation by the male obstetrician in hospital, complete with his (sic) increasing paraphernalia of technology and scientific arguments, is thoroughly reviewed.

Tew is perhaps on less familiar territory with the historical data; for whatever reason, they lack the soundness of the analysis of the statistical and epidemiological data. The blunt analysis of simple careerism by obstetricians is not convincing enough to explain the complexity of events surrounding the increasing trend towards hospital delivery in earlier decades. As well as accepting motives of professional and territorial development, one would surely wish to examine (for example) contemporary social attitudes towards science and technology and to offer a closer analysis of the role of the hierarchy of midwifery. Tew's book presents us with a bit of a conundrum; while the second part of the book presents a rational critique of the obstetric claim to safer childbirth, the first, weaker, section which draws upon sociopolitical arguments, is in a curious way more accurate in that it acknowledges that the debate is not conducted only at a rational level.

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Child Health Matters. Eds Sally Wyke, Jenny Hewison. (Pp 151; £10.99.) Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1990. ISBN 0-335-09393.

The title will attract those who consider themselves advocates of the needs of children, whether health visitors, general practitioners, paediatricians, or public health physicians. While reading the book they will find themselves challenged to reconsider these needs in a way which puts the situation of the family above the interests of health professionals.

The theme of the book is to enable us to understand the parents, almost invariably mothers, who are the real providers of child health care in the community. Drawing on previously published work, detailed description of research methods is avoided in favour of the presentation and discussion of results.

There are 11 papers from contributors with backgrounds in the social sciences, health services research, and community child health. The papers are organised into four sections. "Resources for care" deals with the effect of money on the material environment that mothers can provide for their children. "Perspectives on health" examines the cultural gap between mothers and health professionals and the influences on this gap of ethnic and socioeconomic factors. The mother's common sense approach is contrasted with the booklearning of professionals. "Using health services" describes the factors influencing the mother's decision to consult a doctor when her child is sick. Who defines the appropriate use of health services, mothers or professionals? "Available knowledge" contains concise

reviews of four important topics in child health: breastfeeding, asthma, sexual abuse, and AIDS. Extensively referenced, these provide background information which could be of use in the formulation of local policies.

This book is well written, well compiled, and easily read. It will find a wide readership.

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Lecture Notes in Biomathematics (83)—Mathematical and Statistical Approaches to AIDS Epidemiology. C Castillo-Chavez. (Pp 405; DM80.) Springer-Verlag, Heidelberg, 1989. ISBN 3-540-52174-7.

Mathematical epidemiology is one of many fields where tremendous growth over the last few years has resulted from the need to understand and control the global epidemic of AIDS. In this volume, Castillo-Chavez has edited a wealth of current research (predominantly from the USA), encompassing many of the latest ideas. In particular, emphasis has been placed on further exploring the implications of variable infectivity, the immune system, and social/sexual mixing dynamics for our understanding of the epidemic process.

Discussion of infectivity includes: its measurement; the stages of infection and associated transmission probabilities; modelling heterogeneity in susceptibility and infectivity by introducing heterogeneity parameters (rather than partitioning the population into discrete risk groups); and the effects of variable infectivity in combination with a variable incubation period.

Addressing the immune system, models are developed to describe the complex interaction of the immune system and HIV (accounting for features such as the long latency period, the almost complete absence of free virus particles, the apparently low frequency of infected T₄ cells and the slow T cell depletion seen during the course of the disease). The roles of network theory, alloimmunity, and autoimmunity are also investigated.

It has been shown that the dynamics of the HIV epidemic depend crucially on patterns of social/sexual mixing, and this has resulted in an explosion of theoretical work in this area. Early mathematical models for HIV and AIDS dealt primarily with one homogeneously mixing risk group (often highly sexually active homosexual men). More recently models have been formulated both to examine the impact of non-random mixing, and to develop ideas on social dynamic patterns.

In this compilation, much attention is focused on these related issues, including: the structure and context of social interactions; patterns of contact among individuals in different risk groups; pair formation, taking into consideration the temporary periods of protection provided by short or long term monogamous relationships; mixing frameworks incorporating preference through a mixing function; and heterogeneous mixing by the definition of activity groups within disjointed subgroups.