Part two provides technical guidance on how to organise a system for poison control. This part covers a wide range of topics such as the functions and requirements of information services, clinical services, and analytical toxicological and other laboratory services, and addresses the importance of toxicovigilance as a strategy for prevention. It explains how to deal with major emergencies involving toxic chemicals, and outlines solutions to the problem of obtaining essential antidotes. Also included is advice on the design and content of forms for collecting, storing, and reporting data, followed by a detailed list of the main documentary and library requirements: books, journals, publications of international organisations, computerised databases and educational material, indispensable for the work of a poison information centre.

Additional practical information is provided in a series of six annexes, which describe a computer software system for the management of poisons data (IPCS INTOX Package), examples of chemical records, and classify a large number of antidotes and related agents according to their proved effectiveness and urgency of availability.

I found the book easy to read, clearly written and presented, and it covers a wide range of topics and includes the important strategies those who are interested in the techniques for the prevention of poisoning.

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AIDS and men is a contribution of the Panos AIDS programme from the Panos Institute, which was founded in 1986, to stimulate the development of AIDS-related programming in many parts of the world, like smaller countries (Ghana; Ivory Coast; Kenya; Malawi; Tanzania and Uganda from Africa, Brazil and Mexico from America, Bangladesh and India from Asia, and Russia) to illustrate many different aspects of the relation between men’s actions and AIDS—from machismo in Mexico to homosexuality in Kenya. These country reports share a humanistic approach, as well as the goal to promote the discussion, at the local level if it is possible.

The book has great interest for public health practitioners because it offers an interesting picture on several aspects related to the AIDS prevention in men.

ANDEU SEGURA


British Medical Bulletin 1998;54 (number 4) is an issue devoted to health screening and consists of 17 expert reviews on the topic. The volume, entitled Screening is edited by Professor Catherine Peckham and Dr Carol Dezateux (Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, Institute of Child Health) who have compiled a series of excellent contributions.

The first contribution is by the editors and looks at the issues underlying screening programmes. Their thought provoking introduction raises many important but little recognised issues in screening and sets the scope and context for the rest of the book. They point out there has been an exponential increase in health screening programmes due to rapid technological development and based on the assumption that early detection must be good. As the authors illustrate, this is not always true, and screening has the potential to do harm as well as good. For example, there is increasing recognition that people who receive false positive results may experience considerable anxiety, which may last even after follow up tests are negative. This introduction also highlights the need to test screening programmes on randomised trial evidence to avoid falsely concluding that screening is beneficial when, in fact, it is only detecting disease earlier, or detecting disease that would have been clinically pop.
tant. They also raise the thorny issues of adequate informed consent for screening and screening for genetic mutations.

Many of these difficult questions are discussed in detail in later contributions. For example, there is a paper on communication and interpretation of risk that concisely reviews key psychological research and discusses it in the context of individuals having to make difficult screening decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Other topical themes picked up in subsequent papers are: screening for prostate cancer, screening for colorectal cancer, economic perspectives in screening, and ethical and legal issues in screening.

It is an excellent guide through this difficult and complex subject and would be a valuable resource for anyone working in the area.

ALEX BARRATT


Reviewing a book on peer review is not without some degree of boldness, even more when one knows about some of the limitations of peer review. But it is precisely the increasing effort to “guard the guardians” that is largely summarised in this book, grouped under three main titles: how it is now and what we know, how to do it, and the future. Godlee and Jefferson, with the contribution of 28 other prominent editors of biomedical journals, researchers in the area of peer review and funders, succeed in pulling together the not always consistent evidence on the role of peer review. The authors cover a broad variety of aspects, ranging from the state of the evidence about peer review, not only applied to editorial work but also to grant applications, including its effectiveness, as well as the biases that have been investigated, to innovative topics such as peer review and the pharmaceutical industry, and its role in small journals and non-English language journals. The chapters in part 2 are particularly useful for editors, reviewers and authors as they cover systematic approaches to the implementation of peer review systems, including statistical, economical and ethical aspects. The final part deals with some of the hottest issues in peer review, such as the role of internet and the use of systematic reviews as ways of improving the overall quality of the system, with two informative appendices on the so called Vancouver Group and the World Association of Medical Editors.

The main message of this book is twofold: the good news is that it shows that peer review, as a procedure to select and improve the best scientific evidence, is here to stay, although most probably in a more open and flexible manner, thanks to improvements in communications technology, most notably the internet. The bad news is that, as it is based on human judgement, a greater vigilance needs to be put on factors that may bias such judgement—the evidence is not always clear or, simply, is lacking—such as author and reviewer identification, gender, seniority, and language, among many others. Although some readers—including myself—may not fully agree with D Rennie’s statement that “peer review is democracy” (page 11)—where are the voters and their votes?—, but, rather, would prefer to consider it as an “illustrated” screening test that—with dissemination and time—will turn into a “democratic” diagnostic test, the best news is that this book shows that, since Stephen Lock’s seminal work A difficult balance: editorial peer review in medicine almost 15 years ago, the scientific community has been moving towards a more “evidence-based” role of peer review, providing a wealth of information that is nicely compiled and commented on in this book.

Editors, reviewers, funders and health science researchers at large, together with science sociologists and media experts should definitely use this book as a bedside tool, while awaiting the new evidence that will be presented at the incoming Fourth Congress on Peer Review in Biomedical Sciences in September 2001.

ANTONI PLASÈNCIA

NOTICE

Society for Social Medicine
The Annual Scientific Meeting will be held on the 13–15 September 2000 in Belfast. The deadline for receipt of abstracts is 10 March 2000. Contact the web site for further details: http://www.dundee.ac.uk/socsocmed/