Introduction

There is an increasing awareness of the importance of ethnic factors in the pathogenesis, clinical features and treatment of many diseases (Donaldson and Taylor, 1983). This topic was the subject of a multidisciplinary conference held at the Birmingham Medical Institute in November 1982, and the present issue of the Postgraduate Medical Journal constitutes the conference proceedings. The proceedings of the first Birmingham Conference were published in the Journal in December 1981 (Vol. 57, pp. 747–792).

The term 'ethnic factors' encompasses a great many variables and does not imply that they are necessarily genetic in origin. Indeed, even the striking differences in hypertension and its complications between blacks and whites may well be more closely related to environmental differences than to racial origins.

The delivery of efficient and effective health care to ethnic minorities, who differ from the white population both linguistically and culturally, is rightly a cause for concern. H.R.H. The Prince of Wales (1982) drew attention to this point in his Presidential Address to the British Medical Association. Many British graduates are unaware of the problems encountered by patients from the Indian sub-continent. Their understanding of elementary anatomy and physiology are minimal compared with people educated in Britain (Bakhshi, 1978) and concepts of bacteriology, the nature of disease and compliance with medication are likely to differ as well (Leatherdale, Jhittay and Gill, 1978). Many of these problems will become less prominent in second

generation immigrants, but until then it is the duty of all doctors who care for their patients to improve their awareness of ethnic factors in diseases.

A third conference on ethnic factors in disease is to be held at the Royal College of Physicians in May 1984.

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