

Book Reviews

Radiotherapy, Susan Holmes. Pp. 223. Austen Cornish Publishers Ltd. London, 1988. £6.50.

This is a well-written, easy to read guide to radiotherapy with clear references throughout the text as well as at the end of each chapter which inspires you to read more on this subject. It provides the reader with an up-to-date understanding of the principles, techniques and treatment of malignant disease and emphasizes the importance of nursing attitude, clearly demonstrating the special care required both psychologically and physically by the patient undergoing radiotherapy. The author discusses the side effects likely to be experienced, showing how best to recognize, assess and treat each patient as an individual. The chapter on nutritional care was particularly interesting and helpful.

This book will be a valuable asset for all health care professionals working with cancer patients in hospital and in the community.

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Talking with Patients: A Basic Clinical Skill, Philip R. Myerscough with contributions from A.L. Speirs, R.M. Wrate, C.T. Currie and D. Doyle. Pp. 148, illustrated. Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, Tokyo, 1989. £9.95.

In clinical work, most of us spend more time talking with patients than in any other activity. Since good history taking is also rewarding in diagnostic terms, why is so little written about it? Myerscough hits the nail on the head in his resumé, when he states his unswerving faith in the view that effective, sensitive communication skills *can* be learnt. There has always been a tendency to regard these skills as innate – the naturally ‘good’ doctor is born with them. Certainly this needed to be challenged, and Myerscough has summarized what most medical schools are beginning to include, or at least feel that they should include, in the curriculum. Communication is at the heart of clinical practice. When it fails, complaints and litigation follows; when it succeeds, it is ironical that patients and relatives will forgive major clinical mishaps, even death itself.

In this short book, Myerscough writes clearly and elegantly on many affective aspects of the doctor/patient relationship, touching on subjects such as methods to facilitate communication (non-verbal clues, verbal reflection, clarification, summarising, silences, mirroring, confrontation, etc). He tackles taboo areas such as the avoidance of sexual arousal in doctors exposed to potentially erotic stimuli during clinical work. There is a concentration on the especially difficult areas of communication, namely death and sex. Colleagues contribute illuminating brief chapters on the special skills required for clinical work with the children, adolescents, the elderly and the dying. A selection of semi-humorous line drawings make their points well, particularly the portrayal of a ward round, surely a prime example of poor and terrifying communication from a patient’s point of

view. One of the most valuable chapters is Myerscough’s own on aspects of transcultural communication, in which great wisdom and experience are displayed. I must confess to irritation at the obviousness of some of what is said, and found the imagined inept doctor/patient conversations sometimes too contrived. Some passages seemed too brief to be of value (e.g. on written communication).

The book is aimed at medical students: I therefore showed it to some at the beginning of their first clinical year. They found it enjoyable, but said that they would be unlikely to buy it at £9.95. They felt that they could acquire and improve communication skills quickly by example and practice, and to read about them seemed to formalise things in a way which might actually lead to counter-productive self-consciousness. Both the students and I wondered whether the book might appeal to the general public, as it gives an invaluable and highly readable glimpse of the medical mind.

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Clinical Skills in Medicine. Sixth edition, Alan E. Read. Pp x + 252, illustrated Wright, London, Boston, Singapore, Sydney, Toronto, Wellington, 1989. £6.95.

This inexpensive and handy volume is aimed at the newcomer to clinical medicine and is a successor to ‘*The Clinical Apprentice*’, of which it is a sixth edition. However, it is radically changed and very clearly reflects the experience and views of its author, who has had some assistance with a few sections, but not to an extent which waters down the individual philosophy.

The introduction deals efficiently, if too briefly, with some of the basics such as clothing, conduct, and attitude to study. The main substance of the book is a very readable and thoughtful survey of the examination of the various systems, with the emphasis on commonsense and elementary logic – which so many tutors and clinical students fail to learn and exploit. There then follows a breezy survey of the various aspects of clinical investigations.

Most medical schools lead their students systematically through the mysteries of the clinical examination, aiming at the same knowledge and the same expertise as this book. Even so, this volume is likely to be an ideal companion to that phase of undergraduate training, and many a candidate failing final M.B., or Part II M.R.C.P., would not have done so if they had had the simple insights this volume emphasizes. It truly encapsulates the solid, sensible, logical and good humoured approach for which its author is so well respected, and on which students would do well to model themselves. It is a little thin on aspects relating to drug history, compliance, and therapeutic misadventure: no doubt the next edition can expand this area and the enjoyable, if too brief, introduction. The reviewer started out somewhat sceptically but now concludes confidently that this book