

Book Reviews

Developing Communication and Counselling Skills in Medicine, edited by R. Corney. Pp. 170, not illustrated. Routledge, London, 1991. £12.99, paperback.

This book is one of a growing number of publications over the past few years on the subject of communication skills in medicine. This reflects the rapidly growing recognition that communication skills are of great practical importance both in diagnosis and management, and recognition of the fact that without special training many doctors do not spontaneously develop relevant skills. American medical schools have tended to take the subject more seriously than British medical schools but the balance is shifting. This book makes a useful contribution to the British literature on the subject.

It is a multi-author collection and the authors come from diverse disciplines. Eight out of the 14 contributors are psychiatrists or psychologists. Other contributors include a professor of general practice and two academic nurses. Only three are consultant physicians or surgeons, two of these being oncologists and one a plastic surgeon. This heavily skewed mix of disciplines reflects the way the subject has developed on this side of the Atlantic. As a result there is far greater emphasis on what might be called the counselling aspects of the clinical interview as opposed to the technology of establishing diagnostic information and technology of patient education. This three function model of the clinical interview is well outlined (although not referenced) in the first chapter but the balance is not maintained in the rest of the book.

The book is divided into three sections – ‘basic issues and skills’, ‘developing specific communication and counselling skills’, and ‘the role of the doctor and other professionals’. Each section is in reality something of a hybrid, though this is particularly true of the last section which combines a chapter on self care of the physician and a chapter listing external organizations which can be useful in patient care.

The book suffers from both the advantages and disadvantages of most multi-author texts. The advantages are that several of the individual chapters are particularly well-written and well-balanced accounts by experts in special fields. A particular disadvantage is the difficulty of achieving a coherent structure and style. This volume certainly illustrates that difficulty. For example, the title suggests that methods of developing skills would be a primary theme but in the event this issue is dealt with in scattered sub-sections of individual chapters. The second major disadvantage of multi-author texts illustrated by this volume is the proneness to repetition when common themes are referred to by many different authors.

The main virtue of the book is the collection of chapters on specific communication problems but it is not clear which potential readers are being targeted. The preface itself is ambiguous in this respect referring both to a ‘skills learning approach specifically for medical students’ and also to ‘clear guidance to health professionals’. Medical students might prefer something with more overall structure and more guidance on how to actually learn the skills

in question. Professionals might prefer more depth and some specific referencing.

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Head and Neck Oncology: Diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation, edited by Ernest M. Myers. Pp. 544, illustrated. Churchill Livingstone, Edinburgh, 1991. £65, hardback.

Over the past decade there has been a plethora of books concerning head and neck oncology, most of which have been aimed at the experienced surgeon. This is hardly surprising since this speciality has advanced to the stage where there is little place for the enthusiastic amateur, and both management and operative technique relies on experience and a comprehensive team effort. In view of this, one might question the need for a book which unashamedly admits that its contributors have no more than 10 years experience and their opinions are based on ‘hundreds of patients’ rather than the more usual ‘thousands’. The Preface by the Editor clearly states that this book is primarily aimed at the ‘beginning or intermediate student of head and neck oncology.’ How such an individual is defined or recognized is not said nor is it apparent how much, or how little knowledge such an individual should possess.

As the title suggests the book is divided into three main sections concerned with diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation, each part then being covered by a varying number of specific sections. Six for diagnosis, 17 for treatment and 30 for rehabilitation. It is in these sections that inadequate experience is most obvious for the amount of information varies from ‘suitable for a major textbook’, e.g. nutrition, wounds and anaesthesia, to ‘quite inadequate’ as in most of the reconstructive items. The illustrations are either uninformative, as in the instance of a thyroid mass (15-2) or tumour of the submandibular gland (2-9), or so over-exposed as to make many of the operative illustrations a virtual waste of space and money. This does not apply to the many line drawings concerned with ‘flow charts.’ This is an innovative concept which is effective and might well be copied by other authors.

As with many other publications clearly aimed at the North American market the majority of references come from this continent despite much of the pioneer work in head and neck oncology being carried out elsewhere. This disparity is most obvious in the Milestones which head each section. The choice of both important dates and their innovators (all unreferenced) is on occasions bizarre, and once again a wonderful opportunity has been missed. Yet, despite these many irritations, possibly due to inexperience by the editor, this book has many attractive qualities. The paper and print is excellent, spoiled only by the very poor quality of the photographic reproductions. By concentrating on the three main parameters within