What your patients may be reading

ROBERT GANN

Many of today's health books for lay readers reflect a crisis of confidence in conventional medicine and a search for alternative or complementary approaches. Orthodox medicine can leave patients feeling helpless, undermined by drugs and a hostile environment, according to Stephen Fulder in his latest book *How to Survive Medical Treatment: a Holistic Approach to the Risks and Side Effects of Orthodox Medicine* (£5.95 paperback. London: Century, 1987. ISBN 0-7126-1481-8). Claiming to be the first layman's guide to self care in hospital, it aims at encouraging patients to become more active and take greater control over their own treatment. Unnecessary surgery comes in for particular criticism: a dozen procedures are placed in this category, including hysterectomy, mastectomy, gall stone removal, coronary bypass, and some biopsies. Other risks to patients include x rays ("invisible, lethal, avoidable"), anaesthesia, chemotherapy, and of course drug therapy. Even the healthy are assailed by the risks of technological childbirth, of dentistry (poisoning by dental amalgam), and of vaccinations. The recommended policy on vaccinations is "Get the best and leave the rest." Whooping cough, measles, BCG, rubella, influenza, and cholera vaccinations are regarded as not worth the risk.

The patient can fight back through a combination of information gathering, confidence raising, and the use of complementary therapies. Before treatment the patient is urged to visit the public or medical library, read up on the diagnosis and proposed treatment, and be ready with questions for the consultant. Further good advice is to contact self help groups and seek their support. Once admitted to hospital, relaxation techniques and yoga can reduce stress and aid recovery. Natural methods are suggested for bolstering immunity against hospital infections, and techniques drawn from complementary medicine are recommended to help counteract the side effects of orthodox treatment. Many doctors will not like this book but it is always a stimulating and provocative read. I was moved to follow up a number of the copious references to other publications. These proved more accurate than the reference to my own book, where author and publisher are incorrectly cited.¹

Holistic home treatment

Evidence of the interest in alternatives is the appearance of a new series on them from Penguin. In *Acupuncture for Everyone* (£3.95 paperback. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987. ISBN 0-14-008834-2) Ruth Lever, a doctor who recognises the benefits of complementary therapies, outlines the history and principles of acupuncture and the way it is used in diagnosis and treatment. There is advice on finding a good practitioner and a list of useful addresses. Sheila and Robin Gibson are also qualified doctors and homoeopathic practitioners. Their *Homoeopathy for Everyone* (£3.95 paperback. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987. ISBN 0-14-009320-6) shows the value of homoeopathy in the treatment of a variety of disorders including rheumatoid arthritis, allergies, and depression. The third title in the series is *Chiropractic for Everyone* by Anthea Courtenay (£3.95 paperback. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987. ISBN 0-14-009658-2). Like the others it is a clear and straightforward guide to the uses of the treatment and the ways in which it can supplement orthodox medicines.

As well as telling you what to expect from an alternative practitioner several new books also give advice on treating yourself

with complementary therapies. Two very similar publications provide home guides to homoeopathic self treatment. *Everybody's Guide to Homoeopathic Medicines* by Stephen Cummings and Dana Ullman (£4.95 paperback. London: Gollancz, 1986. ISBN 0-575-03897-7) was first published in America in 1984. In it the reader can learn about "casetaking" and how to prescribe homoeopathic remedies. A good feature of the book is the clarity with which indications for seeking urgent medical attention is presented. Of the two I preferred *Everyday Homoeopathy: a Safe Guide for Self Treatment* by David Gemmell (£6.95 paperback. Beaconsfield: Beaconsfield Publishers, 1987. ISBN 0-906584-18-3). The layout is more straightforward, with the left hand page giving background information on problems from nappy rash through travel sickness to phobias, and the right suggesting appropriate remedies from the homoeopathic medicine chest.

Many popular herbals have been published that tell the reader which herb to use for which problem. Not enough tell you exactly how to use them. I have a flourishing feverfew plant in my garden and know it is suggested as a remedy for migraine. But should I cook with it? make a poultice? a suppository? a herb pillow? or an infusion? David Hoffman's *The Herb User's Guide: The Basic Skills of Medical Herbalism* (£4.99 paperback. Wellingborough: Thorsons, 1987. ISBN 0-7225-1288-0) gives the necessary practical advice on growing, drying, and storing herbs, and making your own infusions, decoctions, oils, and ointments. There is even a useful purpose for couch grass (as a diuretic).

Undoubtedly interest in complementary medicine is growing in the medical profession. A survey of general practitioners in Avon carried out by Dr Richard Wharton, a general practitioner, and Dr George Lewith of the Centre for the Study of Alternative Therapies in Southampton, makes interesting reading.² Of the general practitioners sampled 76% had referred patients to complementary practitioners over the past year and there was a surprisingly high interest in learning more about complementary techniques. Now Dr Lewith and Sandra Horn, a local clinical psychologist, have joined forces to produce *Drug Free Pain Relief: The Natural Way* (£4.99 paperback. Wellingborough: Thorsons, 1987. ISBN 0-7225-1338-0). The book considers a number of alternative ways of coping with chronic pain, focusing particularly on acupuncture and transcutaneous nerve stimulation. Though emphasising that pain is a symptom and that a diagnosis of its cause is essential, the authors illustrate self help techniques that can be used in managing pain with the aid of clear diagrams of acupuncture points and advice on relaxation techniques and meditation.

Killing Pain Without Prescription, from the same publishers, sounds a very similar book (Harold Gelb and Paula Siegel. £2.99 paperback. Wellingborough: Thorsons, 1987. ISBN 0-7225-1484-0). In fact it concentrates on the "TMJ [temporomandibular joint] syndrome," the cause, the author claims, of over 80% of chronic pain. Dr Lewith's colleague and cofounder of the Centre for the Study of Alternative Therapies is Dr Julian Kenyon. His latest book is *Acupressure Techniques. A Self Help Guide* (£5.99 paperback. Wellingborough: Thorsons, 1987. ISBN 0-7225-1467-0). It covers some of the same ground as *Drug Free Pain Relief* and uses many of the same diagrams but there is a useful additional section on sports injuries.

Nutritional medicine

"You are what you eat" has become a commonplace aphorism and there is never a shortage of books on diet and health. "Nutritional medicine" is based on the assumption that many illnesses, mild and chronic, are caused by nutritional imbalance and

can be cured or alleviated by adjusting the patient's biochemistry. A number of patient self help groups are based on this principle (Hyperactive Children's Support Group, the Schizophrenia Association, and Foresight: the Association for Preconceptual Care, for example). The most substantial new book on this topic is *Nutritional Medicine: The Drug Free Guide to Better Family Health* by Stephen Davies and Alan Stewart (£3.95 paperback. London: Pan Books, 1987. ISBN 0-330-28833-4). Doctors Davies and Stewart are both founder members of the British Society for Nutritional Medicine (PO Box 3AP, London W1A 3AP), and here they discuss why nutritional imbalances occur and how nutritional medicine can treat many conditions. The detailed appendices and reference section alone occupies over 100 pages and directs the reader to relevant organisations and further reading.

Since its opening in 1983, and particularly since the interest expressed by Prince Charles, the Bristol Cancer Help Centre has attracted widespread attention and controversy for its holistic approaches to cancer, in which diet plays an important part. *The Bristol Recipe Book* (£3.95 paperback. London: Century, 1987. ISBN 0-7126-1518-0) by Sadhya Rippon, kitchen administrator at the Bristol Centre, contains over 150 recipes based on vegan principles. As the foreword by Penny Brohn, founder of the centre, admits, the early Bristol diets were "remarkable more for their enthusiastic conviction than any noticeable culinary skills." In contrast, the new tasty dishes and down to earth advice (including how to avoid flatulence from beans) contained in this book should appeal to ill and well alike. The recipe book is one of a series published by Century based on the work of the Bristol Cancer Help Centre. The others are *The Bristol Programme: An Introduction to the Holistic Therapies Practised by the Bristol Cancer Help Centre* by Penny Brohn (£4.95 paperback. 1987. ISBN 0-7126-1513-X); *New Approaches to Cancer: What Everyone Needs to Know About Orthodox and Complementary Methods for Prevention, Treatment and Cure* by Shirley Harrison (£6.95 paperback. 1987. ISBN 0-7126-1488-5) and Penny Brohn's moving and funny autobiography *Gentle Giants: The Powerful Story of One Woman's Unconventional Struggle Against Breast Cancer* (£4.95 paperback. 1987. ISBN 0-7126-1508-3).

Nutritional medicine is also the basis of the Ebury New Health Guides. *Foods that Fight Cancer* by Patricia Hausman (£3.95 paperback. London: Ebury Press, 1987. ISBN 0-85223-556-9) is not, as it sounds, a guide to diet as treatment, but advice on prevention. First published in the United States, the book builds on the recommendations of the 1982 Committee on Diet, Nutrition, and Cancer, to eat more fruit, vegetables, and whole grain cereals, reduce fat intake, and eat little salt cured and smoked food. Food additives and naturally occurring toxins also come under the microscope and there is advice on the safest cooking methods. Another title in the series, *The Metabolic Diet* by Patrick Holford (£3.95 paperback. London: Ebury Press, 1987. ISBN 0-85223-566-6) is based on "the dynamic concept of altering metabolic rate to stay permanently slim without continually dieting." Not only does it promise an end to crash dieting but also better sleep patterns and a sharper memory through daily supplements of Glucomannan fibre.

Women's health problems also come in for the nutritional medicine approach. The third new Ebury guide is *Conquering Cystitis* (£3.95 paperback. ISBN 0-85223-576-3) by Patrick Kingsley, a Leicestershire general practitioner and another member of the British Society for Nutritional Medicine, who is committed to the study of clinical ecology. He thinks that cystitis may be caused by an intolerance to one or more foods regularly taken in the diet and gives advice on how to track them down. He is critical of doctors who look no further than the bladder and urethra in a case of cystitis, and advocates an alternative approach that takes the whole body and its relationship with the environment into account.

According to Eric Trimmer (*The Magic of Magnesium*. £1.99 paperback. Wellingborough: Thorsons, 1987. ISBN 0-7225-1423-9), minerals are the Cinderellas of nutrition, receiving less attention than they merit. Magnesium is a "magic mineral," he claims, and magnesium deficiency is often overlooked because of medical apathy and a lack of a reliable scientific test. Yet magnesium can play an important part in combating osteoporosis and alleviating the symptoms of premenstrual syndrome. A postscript on pills and

pregnancy cautions women to consult their doctors before taking drugs in pregnancy, while encouraging use of multivitamin supplements—a distinction that may be lost on some readers. The magic mineral merits only a passing mention in an alternative work from the same publishers on osteoporosis (*Brittle Bones and the Calcium Crisis* by Kathleen Mayes (£4.99 paperback. Wellingborough: Thorsons, 1987. ISBN 0-7225-1352-6). Originally published in the United States, this book suggests changes in nutrition and way of life that can prevent or at least slow down the development of this major chronic disease of older women. Advice is given on increasing calcium in the diet, the value of exercise, and hormone replacement therapy. On the last the important hazards as well as the benefits are enumerated.

Understanding health

Finally, not all new publications this month concentrate on alternatives. Lack of information has often been blamed for the alienation that some patients feel, and a new initiative announced recently brings a range of free health information into the general practitioner's waiting room. *Good Health* magazine and the Association of British Pharmaceutical Industry have together produced a series of eight information booklets which aims at increasing patients' understanding of particular medical conditions and giving straightforward guidance on the treatments available. (*Understanding Health Series*, Hawker Publications, Park House, 140 Battersea Park Road, London SW11 4NB. Telephone 01 720 2108.) The topics are indigestion, bladder control, menopause, asthma, stoma care, acne, depression, and high blood pressure. Each 16 page A5 booklet is similarly designed and contains information independently commissioned by Hawker Publications, publishers of *Good Health*. Sponsorship by pharmaceutical companies allows the publishers to make 55 copies of each booklet available to surgeries and health centres free of charge with replacement copies available from *Good Health* magazine.

References

- 1 Gann R. *The health information handbook: resources for self care*. Aldershot: Gower, 1986.
- 2 Wharton R, Lewith G. Complementary medicine and the general practitioner. *Br Med J* 1986;292:1498-1500.

What is liposuction? Is it a safe and reliable treatment for removing deposits of fat?

Liposuction (lipoplasty, lipolysis) is an operative technique to reduce localised fat deposits with minimal scarring. A suction cannula is introduced through a small incision made in an inconspicuous position. A negative pressure of about one atmosphere aspirates fat into the cannula and tubing with limited damage to the blood vessels, nerves, etc. It is probably safe to aspirate 2 kg of fat at one procedure. The technique is used to reduce unwanted fat deposits that are refractory to usual methods of weight reduction—for example, "the riding breeches" deformity of thighs and buttocks, fat knees or ankles. It may also complement conventional surgery such as facelifting, where it can reduce localised fat deposits, or abdominoplasty. Abnormal accumulations of fat, as in large lipomas or lipodystrophy of the legs, are also amenable to aspiration. If it is carefully and expertly performed liposuction is safe. Most aspirated areas are tender, indurated, and bruised for several weeks. The irregular skin surface of "cellulite" may be improved but not corrected. The two commonest problems are irregularity of contour from an imperfect technique and skin laxity if the skin is inelastic or the fat reduction excessive.—ROY SANDERS, consultant plastic surgeon, London.

- Illouz YG. Body contouring by lipolysis. A 5 year experience with over 3000 cases. *Plast Reconstr Surg* 1983;72:591.
 Hetter GP. *Lipoplasty. The theory and practice of blunt suction lipectomy*. Boston/Toronto: Little Brown and Company, 1984.