Book reviews

Child Abuse: Aspects of Interprofessional Co-operation. By Christine Hallett and Olive Stevenson. (Pp. 118; £7.95 hardback, £3.30 paperback.) Allen & Unwin: London. 1980.

This book, like much of the recent literature on child abuse, traces its origins to the Maria Colwell inquiry in which both the authors participated. That inquiry, together with subsequent ones, is referred to throughout to illustrate the difficulties of communications between professionals who are often working within very different frames of reference. The overall aim of the book is to examine 'inter-organisational and interprofessional relationships with particular reference to child abuse'. While written primarily for social workers, the paediatrician who attends case conferences—if he can survive the unfamiliar jargon—will find plenty to interest him, particularly in the chapter which describes the background to the use of case conferences and discusses their purposes. The authors have drawn on two research studies. For the first they observed 13 case conferences, all in one area, and later interviewed the participants (who happened to include myself) from a subsample. It would seem rash to draw generalised conclusions about inter-professional communication from such a sample. For those interested, the data from this study have been written up in more detail by C Desborough and O Stevenson

(*Case conferences: a study of inter-professional communication concerning children at risk*. University of Keele Social Work Research Project: 1977). The second research project on which the book draws is a larger one which 'examined the task of the local authority social worker and the implications for social work education'. Three aspects of the study were felt by the authors to be relevant to the management of child abuse: relationships between social workers and other professionals, setting of social work priorities, and pressures on staff. References to the findings of this second study are to be found throughout the book, and give us some insights into social work practice.

This book succeeds in highlighting some of the problems in communication between disciplines. Before professionals can hope to work together to help abused children and their families, they must learn to understand each other. It is also clear that the case conference system, as currently operating, would benefit from a reappraisal.

MARGARET A LYNCH

Epidemiology of Anencephalus and Spina Bifida. By J Mark Elwood and J Harold Elwood. (Pp. 413; illustrated + tables. £25.00 hardback.) Oxford Medical Publications: Oxford. 1980.

Congenital defects of the neural tube have

been the archetype for the epidemiological approach to the study of human malformations. They are common, they can scarcely be overlooked at birth, and they are characterised by some tantalising epidemiological features. Anencephalus is convenient because perinatal death is inevitable; spina bifida is inconvenient because it calls for difficult clinical decisions; both are at the heart of the current debate about diagnostic screening.

The Elwood namesakes bring together in this book their own important contributions to the field, a thorough review of the relevant literature, and some comments on the broader issues, especially those related to prenatal diagnosis. It therefore covers wider ground than the epidemiology of the title, including useful data on recurrence risks, but is not intended to guide clinical management. It is above all a reference book, not a book to be read in large slabs.

There is little to cavil at. The literature review would perhaps have been enriched by a more interpretative and critical treatment. The references in the text are not a perfect match with those at the end of the book. And is it not time we agreed to abandon the foetal o? But the style is clear, the content up to date, and the production excellent. The teratology section of your library must make room for this book.

R W SMITHELL