
At school we could always count on a question in the English paper beginning with the words 'Explain with reference to the context'. Believing that this is a sound principle for medicine, Mr. Peterson tries to open the eyes of his students to the complex but increasingly significant social context in which health and disease arise and medicine is practised. And since many illnesses 'can only be explained by the physician in environmental terms' and since the emphasis in medical education is still on morbid anatomy and the management of organic disease, this is, in intention, a timely book.

Mr. Peterson has useful things to say about the need in family practice for new categories of illness and the more sensitive use of prognosis: 'His object (the family doctor's) must be the optimum health of the whole family. He must see that the right questions are asked by members of the family at the right time... The fact that a boy cannot make head or tail of, say, arithmetic may be an important factor in his unacceptable conduct... The realization that a child has an irremedial handicap before the family doctor the fact that both he and the parents are presented with a permanent problem'. And since the author is actively engaged in trying to remedy the problems of which he speaks, he knows that in dealing with contemporary disorders of personal and family life the doctor cannot remain isolated within a pretended neutrality. 'All these things have to be accomplished by dint of his own efforts' and he must achieve 'confidence in moving about among his own thoughts and feelings'.

Yet as a whole this is an unsatisfactory and disappointing book, and if it is really addressed to medical students it is too long. Mr. Peterson recognizes that the student learns chiefly through contact with patients: 'It is sick men and women and children who present themselves at the surgery', yet his human examples are few, and fail in most instances to offer convincing solutions. He could have protected himself fairly against this charge by admitting that this is the inherent limitation of social medicine at the present stage of its development. It knows that social factors are relevant, but equally that they can rarely be defined with the precision that the student has come to expect from the laboratory. We recognize broad categories of 'social class' or 'family competence' but frequently cannot isolate the particular adverse factor or factors within the complex or devise specific social therapy to correct it. The student must understand and respect this if he is to avoid asking more of social medicine than it can give. 'Changing the ways of an individual or a society is no easy thing.' Perhaps the most serious criticism of this book, and it is not Mr. Peterson's fault, is that although it is about medicine it is not written from within it. It is not enough for medical schools to send students into the east ends of their cities for a brief encounter with a sociologist or social worker and a taste of social medicine. Family doctors and physicians, epidemiologists, sociologists and social workers must work together at the centre of medical education, refining the social concepts involved in health and disease and testing their validity in family practice. Mr. Peterson recognizes this in his pertinent quotation from Dr. Vaughan of the Harvard School of Public Health: 'We have found it extremely difficult to use successfully the existing tools which the social sciences have to offer. Social scientists later, after we have worked for a year or two together, say "You have to tell us what it is you want to know and together we have to develop new concepts and tools to fit that particular problem".'

This book is a gallant failure, since rejecting the simpler role of guide to the social services it attempts an interpretation for which the subject as a whole is not ready and the author's experience is in itself inadequate. I would not recommend it to medical students. I hope it will be read critically by those younger doctors (both in medical schools and in family practice) who want to achieve greater precision in their understanding of the relationship of society to medicine.


In this monograph, which in form and content resembles the polemical broadsheet of another era, the author forcibly poses the problem of unexplained sudden death in infants and children, and then proceeds to explain these and other less sudden infant deaths in terms of a hypothetic dysfunction of the pituitary-thyroid-adrenal 'axis'. The underlying cause of the dysfunction of the 'axis' is said to be maternal iodine deficiency. Unfortunately, no evidence is provided in support of the claim that maternal iodine deficiency occurs.

With some apparent justification, Dr. Kemp challenges the finality of the report of the British Status Lymphaticus Committee of 1931, which firmly denied the existence of status thymicus lymphaticus as a pathological entity. Certainly, since 1931, much new knowledge has accrued; more is known, for instance, of the relation of the ductless glands to environmental stress on the one hand and to lymphoid tissue on the other.

In the historical section of Dr. Kemp's monograph we find the following quotation: 'There can be no doubt that the constitutional disturbance known as status lymphaticus is a real entity... taken from 'Pathology for the Physician' by William Boyd, published as recently as 1958. This appears to be an authoritative enough pronouncement on the subject, except perhaps that the title of the work conveys a warning that there is more than one kind of pathology.

Nevertheless Dr. Kemp has reminded us that the cause of sudden death in infants not infrequently remains an unsolved problem.