

## **British Paediatric Association**

### A gem of a book

**Child Health in a Changing Society.** Edited by J O Forfar. Oxford University Press, 1988.

The British Paediatric Association, founded in 1928, has put together as part of its Diamond Jubilee celebrations a really sparkling book. Designed to be read by interested lay persons as well as by health professionals, it fully deserves the prestigious imprimatur of the Oxford University Press.

The secret behind the sparkle is the inspired choice of authors—one, two, or three for each of the nine chapters—and the sure editorial touch of the Association's President, John Forfar. Each chapter reviews the events of the past 60 or so years in the relevant field, describes in non-specialist terms the present state of the art, and—with varying degrees of diffidence—hazards some predictions for the future. All the authors recognise explicitly the reciprocal relationship between health professionals and the rest of society. They and their colleagues exist to serve the children in their communities, from conception to adulthood, but their activities are greatly influenced by the expectations of those communities, their behaviour, their ethos and (coming down to earth) the resources which they allocate to the child health service.

Donald Court (a distinguished Past President of the Association and architect of the Court Report on Child Health Services) joins forces with Eva Alberman to review progress in child health since the turn of the century, and to take a critical look at the state of affairs today. There is cause for gratitude but not for complacency.

David Baum and Martin Bobrow discuss the prospects for preventing congenital and genetic disease, explaining a highly technical field in commendably non-technical terms. Clearly we shall soon have new powers that we must learn to use wisely.

Richard Cooke and Pamela Davies review progress in the care of the newborn, and bravely address some current dilemmas concerning sickly babies and scarce resources. As in genetics, we must

distinguish between what is possible and what is proper.

Martin Bax, Roger Robinson, and Ann Gath write about 'The Reality of Handicap' with a great breadth of knowledge and understanding. Science and compassion go hand in hand. Jean Golding, David Hull, and Michael Rutter take an equally broad brush approach to the influence of environmental factors on child health, and manage to keep all six feet on the ground when discussing such emotional topics as air pollution, zinc deficiency, and food additives.

Aidan Macfarlane and Ross Mitchell look at the links between health, social and educational services, and the importance of those links to child health and development. They see much yet to be done, and little but indifference to delay it.

By this point, gentle reader, you may have noticed that we have not yet set foot in the children's ward (except the neonatal unit). Roy Meadow's evocative and perceptive chapter starts with the unacceptable face of hospital paediatrics 60 years ago and ends with a lament for the second class citizenry of children in District General Hospitals, but there is much cause for rejoicing in between. Alex Campbell tackles with clarity and authority the ethical problems that beset paediatric practice and research, and which seem likely to perplex us even more in the future. Finally, John Forfar contributes a masterly overview of how paediatrics itself has changed since the BPA began.

Nine chapters there may be, but this is not a book of parts. It stands as a whole, enormously informative, totally readable, thoroughly enjoyable. Unlike most medical textbooks, it will remain informative and enjoyably readable for years to come. Parents, teachers, and social workers, as well as doctors and nurses, will find pearls within this diamond. And the breadth of the canvas so colourfully covered serves to remind us all how fortunate we are to be serving Child Health.

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