Is head flattening in infancy a good thing?

EDITOR—Dr Rutter and colleagues have made some useful observations on how the head shape of preterm babies is related to the kind of mattress on which they lie.1 Traditional communities in Pakistan have been aware of this phenomenon in term infants for many generations. Among rural people as distant as the Pathans of northern Baluchistan and the desert dwellers of south east Sindh, mothers specifically seek to modify the shape of their babies’ heads. In the Sindh desert, infants are laid on their backs with their heads constrained in a pottery ‘pillow’ in order to flatten their children’s occiputs. Pathans achieve the same result by swaddling their babies and tying them supine with their heads on a block of wood. Their cots are usually completely covered by a blanket. A third method is used by some Punjabis: babies sleep supine with their heads on small sandbags. The techniques employed to achieve the desired occipital flattening vary throughout Pakistan, but what seems consistent is that a prominent occiput is considered ugly. I was told that this would earn ridicule and the title of ‘melon head’ at school.

Moulding of the skull as practised in Pakistan achieves a permanently altered head shape which persists into adulthood. This implies that mattress type continues to have an influence on head shape throughout infancy.

Although the resulting head shape may not directly compromise fulfilment of intellectual potential, it may be that constraints applied to produce occipital flattening limit the amount of stimulation that the infant receives.

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BOOK REVIEWS


Paediatrics has a long and distinguished history of interest in the psychosocial aspects of illness. Nowhere is this more evident than in the treatment of children with chronic diseases. The improved survival rates in many of these children makes the emphasis on psychosocial issues increasingly pertinent.

Dr Christine Eiser, a research fellow in the department of psychology at the University of Exeter, is a leading writer and researcher in the UK on the psychological aspects of childhood chronic disease. In Growing up with a Chronic Disease she describes clearly and with sensitivity the impact such illness can have on children and their families. This book, first published in 1990, Chronic Childhood Disease: An Introduction to Psychological Theory and Research, Dr Eiser emphasised the need for clinicians to be aware of research into the psychological effects of disease on children and their families and she reviewed the literature on various topics such as the effects of admission to hospital on children, the nature of pain, the psychiatric adjustment in the child with chronic disease and in the family, and educational aspects.

Her latest book emphasises the importance of focusing less on maladjustment and more on coping mechanisms used by sick children. The author takes a family viewpoint and she considers the way in which illness can affect children at different stages in their development, for example preschool children, schoolchildren, and adolescents. Special consideration is also given to the effects of illness on families and parenting and to the attitudinal discrepancies towards illness and its treatment between different family members and between families and paediatric units. The book examines the psychological resilience to stress of all children and their families. The majority do in fact show a remarkably good adjustment to the stresses involved.

The way in which topics are presented is mixed in that the book combines descriptions about the way in which illness affects children and parents, many of which would be well familiar to those dealing with these children and intuitively known to many non-professionals, with discussion of research findings. There are some difficulties with this and paediatricians might find the descriptive sections too familiar and the research discussions insufficiently critical on occasions. The book is however clearly written, and it should be helpful for paramedical professionals involved in the care of chronically ill children. It should help increase professional awareness of relevant psychological aspects and it is a good source of information on the research work that has been carried out in this field.

M E GARRALDA
Professor of child and adolescent psychiatry


The editors of the Archives seem able to detect the impending onset of my annual leave with unerring accuracy. This year was no exception, and saw this large and heavy book lying its way out of the confines of a jiffy bag and into the barely more generous space allotted to us on the Euston-Inverness sleeper. Finally it sat dominant over the lighter works intended for holiday reading in the tiny cottage on the Outer Hebrides until I gave up a couple of the predictably wet and windy days to study. The scope of the contents is ambitious, ranging from the basics of developmental biochemistry and placentology and finally a thorough review of all the major organ systems. There are 15 major sections in all, written by a wide range of expert contributors from all over the world. The strength of the book is in the breadth of the basic science base for clinicians and a development perspective for scientists. In order to achieve this and to cover the very wide range of topics the material flows through placental ‘bytes’ of only a few thousand words each, without a chapter and verse type bibliography but with a short selected reading list. This makes for easy and satisfying reading, and is an advantage to tackle a few sections at a time and finish them completely. The depth of the

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