

book reviews

Medical humanities – a practical introduction

Edited by Deborah Kirklin and Ruth Richardson. London: Royal College of Physicians, 2001. 158pp. £19.50.

Medical humanities consists of a series of essays from diverse hands on the important topic of contemporary medicine and how its skills may be best applied to those in society who are sick, ill, in diminished health or dependency for whatever reason. The content is in varying degrees polemical by virtue of the different disciplines and the priorities which they engage. It ranges over the education of doctors and their teams, the attitudes of patients to their illness and the interaction between a patient and the medical adviser when unpatronising compassion needs to flow between them. The emphasis throughout is on sympathetic understanding and lucidity.

The nature of the training of doctors and associated professionals demands attention not only to the constant updating of core knowledge due to advances in science and technology but also to an awareness of the rapid shifts in society's concern with ethical and moral issues. It is against this backdrop that people with a disability in health expect and at times demand that scientists, doctors and community workers provide them with a compassionate translation of these discoveries into practical support and treatment.

Two consistent dilemmas run through the texts. One is how and whom to educate to provide what skill to which patient. The other is how much time to apportion to allow a deepening of understanding in the 'provider' or for the necessary thinking and reflection to explain to the patient sympathetically and in sufficient detail the process of providing medical care; for example no-one working in clinical practice can be content, whatever their degree of enlightenment, to be forced to complete a consultation which occupies only five to ten minutes.

At first I was distracted into making comments in the margin and must admit to a certain unease at the enthusiastic effervescence of ideas, some not validated or substantiated. A second reading allowed my natural caution to settle. The book as a whole is thoroughly stimulating and thought provoking. There is much emphasis on creativity and the place of the humanities and the arts in the continuing educational process. I could not personally accept the addition of audited or assessed 'arts training' as an undergraduate subject standing alongside clinical and the science disciplines necessary to an already overburdened medical curriculum. An integrated historical and cultural background in the humanities is a lifetime's need and there is scope for optional focused interjection of many of the fertile ideas suggested by these essays.

The weakness in the fusion of the arts and sciences is primarily an educational problem. It stretches back through the whole structure of society with its competitors for priority, status, standardisation and politicisation. Students are entering universities in many instances with limited knowledge of their own culture without a rounded introduction to the arts. Some may also lack the necessary foundation in their own field to evolve a framework for their future

development to maturity. The true function of a university is to augment intellectual and imaginative development in the sciences and the arts, and this also applies to language in a grammatical and literary sense, to the creative process and to a historical perspective and background. The concept of the 'two cultures' is a myth, they are irrevocably fused. Some attempts have been made to correct this at tertiary level by foundations years, introduction of alternative modules in the arts or the sciences, and the flexibility that allows options that are appealing and needful to mix the disciplines.

The arts, humanities and sciences in themselves do not possess intrinsically or of necessity a social bias. The creative genius is held in common and may have no concern for social engineering. It would be arrogant to assume otherwise. There is little social implication for example in three definitions of art which spring to mind and are essentially self indulgent. Thomas Mann's dictum 'art is truth, the truth about the artist'; Oscar Wilde's aphorism 'all art is both surface and symbol, those who look below the surface do so at their peril' and Salvador Dali who compared art to an amalgam of 'blinding spiritual infantilism and nutritive oral delirium'! However Keats' gentle reminder that 'beauty is truth and truth is beauty and that is all you need to know', is more in keeping with the gravitas of the texts of this volume of essays.

These essays are illuminated with insight, 'empathy' and metaphor. The visual arts, poetry and the creative acts are explored and given their place, and there is a good measure of cautious idealism in *Medical humanities* which forces one to the conclusion that there is no easy solution to this perennial problem for scientist, doctor, health professional, artist, author or musician. The development of a social conscience and its morality and ethics, its sense of duties and rights has defeated many philosophies and religious dogmas. On the reverse side of an Oslerian medal is engraved his dictum 'listen to the patient'. This is as ever apt and is accounted in these essays. The far off days of a century ago when classical and medical scholarship were fused in individuals such as William Osler or Clifford Allbut, are eclipsed. The velocity of the world has accelerated and there is a serious lack of time, lack of patience to listen and to reflect. This is essential for the practice of 'holistic' medicine which has been recognised since the days of Hippocrates. There is a parallel requirement for enlightened, apolitical reform of primary and secondary education and the assessment of the true function of a university.

The reading of these essays urges me to advocate flexibility in educational training with less recourse to dogmatism and a desire to ignore tradition. Tradition is regarded as expensive and at times of radical change ('reform') it is tradition which is most easily and wilfully re-written or totally rejected. One's rosy hopes of a brave new world hesitate, however, before the words of Leonardo 'time thou swift destroyer of created things, how many kings, how many empires hast thou laid waste'.

The message that lies at the heart of the series of essays is the concept of trust and how to achieve it for a healthy society. It is a powerful didactic read bristling with ideas which leave no scope for complacency. It stretches the mind, is compulsive and unsettling which is to its credit. It is a refreshing challenge and it is pleasing that it should appear as a publication under the aegis of this college.

JIM HERON, *Staffordshire*