

Medical ethics today: its practice and philosophy.**Second edition.****By the BMA Ethics Department. BMJ Books, London 2003. 832pp. £60.**

I count myself extremely fortunate to have been asked to review this really excellent reference handbook. In the very best tradition of a trade union, the BMA is providing a much needed and critically important service to its members and other practising doctors who may use it. It makes no pretence to provide definitive ethical argument but is designed, as its title suggests, to be a handbook; a useful reference for its members and other doctors in clinical practice. From the very first chapter, 'The BMA's approach to medical ethics', the book is essentially practical in nature. In order to provide robust and therefore useful advice, each of the myriad problems covered in the text is approached by careful analysis, review of the moral and ethical arguments for and against particular positions, and a clear summary of the relevant legal position and the guidance offered by the GMC and other statutory bodies. This then allows the authors to draw from these data clear summaries which are helpfully bulleted, together with very practical guidelines on how to approach and resolve ethical dilemmas.

I made no attempt to read all of the much enlarged and enhanced second edition. I read two chapters on topics of which I expected to have a reasonable knowledge and understanding, and one chapter about which I know relatively little except as a layman. In relation to the chapter 'Consent and refusal' I was gratified to find that, having recently prepared a lecture on this subject from other sources, I appeared to have both a good understanding of the field and no cause to disagree with the presentation of the argument, guidelines or summaries. One of the best reasons to recommend any book is that you agree with it! Despite my familiarity with the topic, I will nevertheless find the chapters useful as a reference concisely summarising the issues and the important legal precedents.

The chapter 'Research and innovative treatment', is also a useful and broad-ranging review of the issues relating directly to research subjects. I was disappointed by the somewhat sparse coverage on monitoring of research and innovative treatment and on research ethics committees. Providing a review for *Clinical Medicine* and with my own vested, though not pecuniary, interest in the innovative work of the Royal College of Physicians over several decades in this area, I could not help but feel that it was perhaps churlish of the authors not to mention either this or the most widely used guidelines for local research ethics committees published by the College. The middle example of three in one box on controversial research describes, if I understand it correctly, an ethics committee concluding that implied failure to respect patients was a harm in itself, and I infer that they used this argument to override other potential harms in their requirement for patient consent. This reminded me of the need to be able to bear in mind and balance the different philosophical approaches to medical ethics briefly described in the introductory chapter. The topical chapter on 'Euthanasia and physician assisted suicide' is relatively short, but admirably demonstrates the strength of this book in simply describing the reasoning behind the formulation of the current BMA view which is against a change in the law to allow euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide.

No review of this book would be complete without mentioning how thoroughly modern it is. *BMJ* publications excel in producing e-books in a user friendly and straightforward format accessible to all with any degree of computer literacy. As a reference book, this form of publication renders it immensely more practical to use in clinical practice. I will certainly be primarily a user of the CD rather than the book.

I warmly commend it to everyone practising medicine and believe it will also be extremely useful to those in other health professions. The book in itself contributes significantly to the legitimacy of the claim made on the first page that the BMA's role and standing in medical ethics has grown exponentially over recent years. Indeed it has – and with good reason.

JH TRIPP

Senior Lecturer in Child Health,
University of Exeter Postgraduate Medical School

The exotic fruits of my life.**By Peter O Williams. RANA, Bletchington, Oxfordshire 2003. 157pp. £20.**

Thomas Carlyle emphasised, by holding that well-written lives are almost as rare as well-spent ones, the fact that the lot of the autobiographer is never easy. This is particularly so in the case of physicians and scientists; their personal lives are rarely as exotic as those of the more visible professions, while their work, however important, is often only of interest to a limited audience of those in similar fields.

As well as an eye-catching title, Peter Williams has gone a long way to overcoming some of these problems. Against a lightly sketched backcloth of his family's peripatetic lives in the colonial service and his work for the Wellcome Trust, he has recounted the hitherto neglected story of the remarkable contributions of this country to the nutrition and health of the tropical world while, at the same time, giving us some fascinating insights into the development of medical research during the latter half of the twentieth century. One word of warning however. Having seen the title, those who are addicted to reading about the lives of the great and the not so good may be anticipating some more of the same. They will be disappointed; it appears to be based entirely on an account of Peter's erudite and informative musings in an Oxfordshire supermarket on the origins and horticultural history of the tropical fruit on offer.

The story begins with the appointment of Peter's father as curator to the botanical gardens in Trinidad, his subsequent rise in the colonial service, and the family's diverse experiences in the many countries in which he worked. Against this background, Peter describes the development of botanical gardens, and agriculture in general, in the developing countries and the resulting contribution of the British Empire to improvements in local nutrition and health; topics rarely mentioned in the current and more introspective accounts of the Raj. After a brief description of his medical training and national service, and his short spell with the MRC, the rest of the book is dedicated to the Wellcome Trust, particularly the period between 1965 and 1991 when he was Director. Over these years the Trust evolved from a small cottage industry to the largest medical