

book reviews

Bioethics and the humanities: attitudes and perceptions

By Robin Downie and Jane Macnaughton. Taylor and Francis, Abingdon 2007. 208 pp. £27.99.

It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it.

John Stuart Mill, 1859¹

The authors of this interesting book put forward the idea that students are 'trained' to be doctors rather than being 'educated in medicine'. Yet students need to acquire humane attitudes to make humane judgments, as the late Sir Douglas Black wrote in reviewing an earlier book by the same authors.² Sir David Weatherall has also addressed these issues in his book *Science and the quiet art*,³ while the late Professor John Malins (previously Linacre Fellow at the Royal College of Physicians (RCP)) described the necessity for reading to make 'the sort of doctor whom we would like to consult as patient or colleague'.⁴ In an earlier generation, William Osler suggested that 'the modern scientific man' should be saturated with the Bible, Plato, Horace, Shakespeare and Milton.⁵ In the USA, the journal *Literature and Medicine* is entirely devoted to the role of humanities in relation to clinical practice, and the RCP has also published a book entitled *Medical Humanities*.⁶ Many American medical schools and some in the UK now have departments of medical humanities.

The principal theme of *Bioethics and the humanities* is to examine the premise that inclusion of humanities in the medical curriculum can so broaden the education of doctors that it has a beneficial effect on the relationship between doctors and patients by altering perceptions and attitudes: the authors describe this as the 'supplementary' function of studying humanities. They point out that these studies also contribute to the 'critical' examination of bioethical arguments and assumptions, thus enhancing the understanding of the bioethical regulatory functions of clinical practice.

There are chapters on moral philosophy (describing the philosophical basis of medical ethics); on epistemology and logic (including definitions of health and disease, and a discussion on understanding qualitative research); on political philosophy and bioethics (examining issues around public health); on medical half-truths (describing changing ideas of professionalism, special relationships with patients, problems from consumerism and ideas on quality of life); and one on the importance of literature (including comments on the skills of letter writing, and a critique of the concept of the narrative history which can 'obscure as much as it can illuminate'). They are all enlivened by descriptions of real situations together with quotations from widely diverse literary sources. For example, the authors point out that attempts to define 'health' may lead to a distortion of human values 'by forcing one ideal of the good life on us':

*Better to hunt in fields, for health unbought
Than fee the doctor for a nauseous draught.
The wise, for cure, on exercise depend;
God never made his work, for man to mend.*

(John Dryden (1631–1700))

The penultimate chapter brings us back to earth, describing studies undertaken in Glasgow to examine the reality of introducing the humanities into medical education. We learn that compulsory courses were unsuccessful; that voluntary courses succeeded, and in time, participants formed a club outside the curriculum; and that humanities introduced as an examinable special study module (jointly with the Department of Philosophy) was felt to be a successful addition to the curriculum, although final research and evaluation is still awaited.

This book is valuable for doctors who wish to enhance their understanding of the philosophical basis of medical ethics, and for those interested in introducing humanities into medical education, and it has an extensive bibliography. Well-balanced arguments are generally presented with clarity, although it is not light bedtime reading, and throughout there is an irritating habit of enumerating arguments – 'first...second...third...'

Our authors remind us that the role of studying the humanities is a continuous process enhancing education of medical students, though not appropriate for all. They observe that 'to be educated is not to have arrived; it is to travel with a different view'. I always found it easy to teach students how to take a medical history, but reminded them that its interpretation comes only with years of experience, in other words, by travelling 'with a different view'. So will study of humanities make better doctors, or is good doctoring largely an innate personal quality as many believe?

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References

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- 2 Black D. Book review. *J R Coll Physicians Lond* 2000;34:401.
- 3 Weatherall D. *Science and the quiet art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- 4 Malins JM. The novels that I enjoy most. *BMJ* 1985;290:384–5.
- 5 Osler W. Books and men. In: *Aequanimitas*. London: HK Lewis & Co Ltd, 1926:219–25.
- 6 Kirklin D, Richardson R. *Medical humanities*. London: Royal College of Physicians, 2001.

Portrait of the brain

By Adam Zeman. Yale University Press, New Haven 2007. 256 pp. \$27.50.

Adam Zeman, whose earlier excellent book on consciousness achieved considerable approval from the neuroscientific community, has entered the field of Oliver Sacks, bringing to an understanding of the brain and how it may work through case histories largely or totally gathered from his own experience.

He takes us on a journey from the molecular molecules of DNA to

the anatomy of the soul, each one of the chapters through this journey being exemplified by a neurological disease. For example, Huntington's chorea illuminates the chapter on DNA, while prions are the focus for protein and its abnormalities. Moving on there are chapters that describe the common (such as epilepsy), the less common (such as Gelineau's syndrome) and the rare (such as multicore myopathy).

The overriding theme of the text is to describe to an essentially lay audience the structure and function of the brain, all of which is nicely achieved with some straightforward illustrations.

Those who know Adam Zeman cannot fail but to detect the personal thread of his charm and clinical sensitivity meandering through this book which will be enjoyed by neurologists, psychiatrists and others interested in the interface between their discipline and the human being. To help the less initiated there is a useful glossary, and the book itself is nicely laid out and excitingly produced.

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Matters of exchange: commerce, medicine and science in the Dutch golden age

By Harold J Cook. Yale University Press, New Haven 2007. 576 pp. \$35.00.

Professor Harold J Cook is the Director of the Wellcome Centre for the History of Medicine at University College, London. An honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians (RCP), he is particularly known to historians of the RCP as the author of *The decline of the old medical regime in Stuart London*. *Matters of exchange* is very much more ambitious. It has been 20 years in the writing and since much of the material he needed was in Dutch and not translated into English, it was necessary for him to learn the language and to work for a period in an academic department in Holland. The result has been spectacularly successful. The author excels not only in describing the broad sweep of history in the Netherlands during the 16th and 17th centuries but also in providing detailed biographical sketches of the individuals who contribute to his story. He clearly demonstrates the importance of Dutch commerce and trade in the development of medicine and scientific enquiry in the Dutch golden age. He emphasises the significance of Dutch activities abroad, in Brazil, the Caribbean, South Africa and particularly in the East Indies where the Dutch East India Company, founded in 1602, sought spices, plants, materials and all manner of exotics in their successful pursuit of profit. Remarkably it was also the era when the Netherlanders were in constant conflict with their overlords, the Hapsburgs, as well as ousting the Portuguese from the overseas territories that they coveted. Cook graphically describes the enthusiasm of merchants and others for the gardens and cabinets of curiosities that they created, arguing that it was the commerce in which they engaged that made these activities possible. At the same time the need for accurate information grew from commerce and exchanges, stimulating a new objectivity at a time when abstract reasoning was being replaced in that post-renaissance era.

Many of the chapters contain material which will come as fresh to the medical historian. There are accounts of Dr Nicholas Tulp, the

anatomist immortalised by Rembrandt in the *Anatomy Lesson*, of Descartes and his life in the Netherlands, of doctors such as Bernard Mandeville, who emigrated to London, and of the men whose adventures took them far afield and often to an early death in an unhealthy climate. The activities of the Dutch East India Company figure largely in Cook's narrative. It was the Dutch who built ships that could traverse oceans and weather the storms of the roaring forties, enabling them to bring back cargoes that made princely sums for those who invested in them. He describes the work of botanists such as Carolus Clusius, of physicians like Jacob Bontius and of many others whose activities contributed to this remarkable era of Dutch history. Willem van Rhine was perhaps one of the most interesting of these individuals. He worked initially in the Cape and was later sent to Japan by the Dutch East India Company. How the Hollanders were able to establish their presence in Japan and the settlement of the Island of Deshima, connected to the mainland only by a well-guarded bridge, is a fascinating story, as is the account of van Rhine's successful introduction of Western medicine into Japan. The author does not neglect the events that took place in the Netherlands at the same time. The early years of the University of Leyden, founded in 1575 after the inhabitants had survived a long siege by their Spanish enemies, provide an excellent background to the later developments of its medical school under Herman Boerhaave more than a century later.

For physicians with an interest in medical history, this book is highly recommended as a unique introduction to the medicine and science of Holland during its golden age. As an era with which British historians of medicine are largely ignorant, it should be available in all libraries. The writing is clear and straightforward even though for the general reader there may be rare moments when it is not always easy to tell the wood from the trees. Cook's *Matters of exchange*, however, is likely to become a standard work. It is difficult to see how it could be superseded.

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