

Petr Skrabanek and James McCormick: *Follies and Fallacies in Medicine*. The Tarragon Press, Glasgow, 1989. 170 pp.

Self-criticism is a healthy exercise, and also often entertaining for spectators. In "Follies And Fallacies in Medicine", Skrabanek and McCormick, both of whom work in the medical profession, engage in vigorous criticism of their own profession, and the result is hopefully healthy and indeed entertaining.

Their stated goal is to examine dogma and accepted truth which may stand in the way of progress of science and growth of knowledge, and to advocate the need for criticism in medicine. The ensuing round of doctor-bashing contains many well considered and elegantly formulated criticisms of irrational practice and thoughtless acceptance of medical myths, and makes for good reading.

They start off by examining the placebo effect, ever useful to medical practice, presenting a historical parade of useless treatments which none the less have won great acclaim because of popular belief in their effect. In general, belief either on the part of the physician or the patient or both is clearly a key element in cure. They further assert that the placebo effect is a well kept medical secret, which most practising physicians are loath to discuss publicly.

A chapter on diagnosis and labelling, and the myths and tricks in this field, perpetuated more or less unknowingly by medical practitioners and patients alike, is also thought-provoking and useful reading. Alternative medicine is given short shrift, whether carried out by persons with a degree in medicine or not.

Unfortunately the authors, who are more than usually eloquent, sometimes get carried away by their own eloquence, and while this makes the book entertaining to read, it sometimes displays a certain shallowness, for example in comments such as the one reading: "Since life itself is a universally fatal sexually transmitted disease, living it to the full demands a balance between reasonable and unreasonable risk."

At times they carry their arguments to the extreme. A chapter on the problems of prevention, which are real enough, is marred by the authors' exaggeration of the motives and intentions of "enthusiasts for prevention", for example in unjustified statements such as: "The major, and utopian, goals of health promotion are the elimination of coronary heart disease and cancer". In their dislike for moralization, they sometimes sound less like Angry Young Men than like aged conservatives whose favourite defence against unpleasant messages of truth is to exaggerate and distort the arguments of the message.

A healthy skepticism vis-a-vis for example uncritical population screening is mixed with a curious fatalistic belief that "... some of us are programmed to die before our seventieth birthday and a few of us are programmed to become centenarians. This programme is coded in our genes and is unalterable, at least for the time being."

At times they contradict themselves, as when on page 48 they castigate the use of large studies, which often involve a number of centres "or, what is even less desirable, the pooling of results." They then happily go on, on page 95, to use pooled results to prove their own argument about the pointlessness of altering risk factors to diminish heart disease.

There is no doubt that the book is healthy reading, and stimulates healthy skepticism of accepted truths in health care. No holy stone is left unturned, and astute observations abound. It is however possible that the rather provocative tone of the book will put off those who need to read it most, the "orthodox magicians" of medical practice. "Medicine only becomes a threat to health if it remains untempered by the use of rational inquiry and criticism. Such criticism is an important and relatively neglected task." So true. So please go on, but do it thoroughly!

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