technique. He emphasises that this specialized treatment should only be carried out by psychologically trained thanatologists.

The author maintains that all dying patients can benefit from informed psychological care, and thoroughly justifies this view in the introductory part of the book. Unfortunately he omits to write much about the treatment he offers the majority of them. He closes with a survey of the literature from Freud through Saunders to Weisman. Summaries of their views are detailed enough to be interesting and valuable in themselves; excellent signposts for new readers in this field. Also he suggests criteria for the description and assessment of psychological terminal care which, if adopted, would facilitate comparison of work in different centres. Even without these bonuses, this practical book is worth reading for the central descriptions, which are both moving and rigorously disciplined.

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Reading about. . .

Mental Handicap

by B. H. Kirman

Mental handicap raises a great variety of problems at clinical, psychological and social levels. The debate as to who is responsible for each particular aspect has become more acute of late and there is little general agreement. It is meantime essential that the psychiatrist learning about or taking responsibility for services for the mentally retarded should be well informed on all aspects of the problem, so that he is able constructively to co-operate with colleagues from other disciplines and to translate advice into appropriate action. Practice will vary according to local circumstance. For example, it is suggested that children should now seldom be admitted to hospitals for the mentally handicapped (National Development Group for the Mentally Handicapped, 1977; 1977a). This and other pamphlets by the National Development Group and the Development Team for the Mentally Handicapped will repay study to gain an impression of current opinion on this and related aspects of the matter. A more general statement about the measures to help mentally handicapped people in hospital (National Development Group for the Mentally Handicapped, 1978) presents what may be regarded as official views on the subject. The report of the Jay Committee (Committee of Enquiry into Mental Handicap Nursing and Care, 1979) sets out some arguments in favour of a common training for those caring for the mentally handicapped in hospital and in training centres.

Fortunately paediatricians are now more able to devote time to the care of the mentally retarded child. It remains essential for a psychiatrist working in this field to acquaint himself with the early history and development both of retarded and of normal children. He should work closely with a paediatrician and perhaps with a child neurologist. A useful text is that edited by Clifford Rose (1979) which contains much clinical wisdom on the management of errors of development and related problems such as epilepsy and cerebral palsy, which are very common in mental handicap.

Popular notions of the mentally retarded are still much affected by prejudice, superstition and ignorance. The serious student would do well to glance at the works of Ireland (1877) to see the position as it was before the growth of most of the present institutions and centres for the mentally handicapped. It is also helpful to get a sense of perspective by dipping into some of the writings on mental handicap which appeared in the earlier years of this century at a time when excessive claims were made for eugenics and when the mode of action of genetic factors was crudely oversimplified, whilst socio-economic considerations were neglected. The earliest edition of Tredgold's text (1908) and Burt's (1937) earlier writings give some insight into these trends.

It was Penrose more than any other worker or writer who brought the study of mental handicap into line with modern understanding of biology with its emphasis on the great variety of interacting forces which go to shape the human organism and intellectual capacity. His Colchester survey (Penrose, 1938) remains a classic. The last edition of his major text is dated 1972. A more detailed study on a biological model derives from the same hand and summarizes our knowledge of Down's syndrome which makes up perhaps one third of severe mental handicap in childhood (Smith and Berg, 1976). A fundamental, though much neglected, aspect of the study of mental handicap is examination of the brain

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.137.5.491 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by contemporary techniques. Crome and Stern's (1972) work is a milestone in our understanding of the anatomical basis of mental handicap.

There is at present increasing appreciation of the contribution to be made to the field of mental handicap by different disciplines and of the need for multidisciplinary teams. Outstanding work in this area has been done by psychologists. O'Connor and Tizard's Darenth Park study (1956) is a classic which sparked off the movement against segregation and institutionalization of the mentally handicapped with the demonstration that many of those then in hospital were fit for open employment. A complementary review is Jack Tizard's (1964) book on community services for the mentally handicapped. A well balanced team approach is presented under the editorship of two eminent psychologists in Clarke and Clarke (1974). Among other things this includes a chapter by Janet Carr on the effect of the severely subnormal on their families, a subject of special interest to psychiatrists.

The third edition of our text (Kirman and Bicknell, 1975) is again written by a team and, whilst clinically orientated, attempts a review also of the biological and social background and goes on to consider advice, counselling, treatment, education and training. Shorter and simpler accounts are provided in Kirman (1972 and 1975).

There is a considerable literature intended for parents of the mentally handicapped and also for various professions dealing with the problem. Victoria Shennan's text (1980) for nurses and therapists caring for the mentally handicapped sets out advice at a very simple level and has insight derived from close contact with the National Society for Mentally Handicapped Children. This is well worthy of perusal by the interested psychiatrist since it presents the problem very much from the consumer angle and indicates areas in which advice is required.

Mental handicap cannot usefully be viewed in isolation. Understanding of the problem involves consideration of normal individual and social development. Disturbances which are usually included under the heading of child psychiatry overlap considerably with the concept of retarded development. The text edited by Rutter and Hersov (1976) covers many of the relevant aspects of child psychiatry for those with a particular interest in mental handicap. Many subjects such as infantile autism lie across the boundary between the two sub-disciplines and indeed there is much to be said, as is done in some health service regions, for blurring the distinction between these two areas of work. Likewise the distinction between mental illness and mental handicap which might seem clear in theory is very blurred in practice. The brief text edited by James and Snaith (1979) illustrates some areas of overlap.

A number of texts consider special aspects of mental handicap. A proper understanding of the laws which determine learning and alteration of behaviour is necessary for those concerned with mental handicap and a useful practical guide has been edited by Yule and Carr (1980). Craft and Craft (1978) cover some sexual problems. An essential standby for reference is a good atlas showing syndromes. Those by Holmes and colleagues (1972) and Smith (1976) can be recommended. Increasingly the clinical geneticist and paediatrician deal with the genetic problems but the psychiatrist working in the field must be well informed on the subject. Genetic information is to be found in the atlases and main general texts mentioned above and recent developments have highlighted this aspect of the problem (Kirman, in preparation).

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https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.137.5.491 Published online by Cambridge University Press