

## Book Reviews

Editor: Sidney Crown

### **Suicide Risk: The Formulation of Clinical Judgement.**

By JOHN T. MALTSBERGER. New York: New York University Press. 1986. Pp 174. \$32.00.

The bibliography in this book is far longer than the index and contains in excess of 150 quoted publications. This might not seem out of the ordinary except that these include Jones on von Kleists' suicide, Seneca's *Lucillium Epistolae Morales*, Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and Asberg on 5-HIAA in the cerebrospinal fluid. This book beckons to be read, and the reader will not be disappointed. It is short and to the point, containing many illuminating and resourceful references well-rooted in literature, history, psychoanalysis, and general human experience.

So often American authors use a language tantalisingly reminiscent of English but startlingly incomprehensible. This is also unfortunately true of many psychoanalytic tracts closer to home. However, this book admirably avoids these pitfalls and is clear and straightforward. It is divided into 5 sections with a particularly entertaining and comprehensive excursion through the vulnerability to suicide (and it is possible to write in an entertaining manner about such a subject while never being light-hearted or frivolous). The other sections include the suicide crisis, recognising the suicidal patient, the formulation of suicide risk, and the pitfalls in estimating suicide danger.

The author proves most illuminating when highlighting the basic psychodynamic elements of vulnerability to suicide and the suicide crisis itself, as illustrated by "poor Blanche DuBois who in order to maintain her mental balance had always depended on the kindness of strangers" or in patients who lose their equilibrium when their idealisation of a leader is interfered with, such as in the case of Albert Joffe, a devoted communist who before committing suicide wrote to Trotsky when Stalin excluded him from the party, "... that is why it is time to put an end to my life ... I cannot go along with the state of affairs where the party tolerates in silence your [Trotsky's] exclusion".

Perhaps the weakest area in the book is the final chapter, entitled 'Pitfalls in estimating suicide danger', which leaves one feeling somewhat frustrated by the author's attempt to place the unsuccessfully prevented suicide firmly at the feet of the professionals who are unable or unwilling to fulfil his rigorous criteria for

a full psychodynamic formulation. Maltzberger alludes to the psychoanalytic and other therapeutic treatment strategies which would be introduced once this assessment has taken place: "formulation is the basis as well of intelligent psychoanalytic psychotherapy of suicidal patients, but these matters are outside the scope of this book". I suspect that a book covering these aspects would be a rather different kettle of fish. In addition, if it contained controlled outcome studies of such psychoanalytic treatments it would also be very short.

Nevertheless, these are relatively minor quibbles in what is an intellectually satisfying and very readable tome. I recommend it most highly to psychiatric trainees and general psychiatrists alike, although I suspect that the majority of doctors in casualty departments who are in the front line of the initial assessment of suicide risk would find it a rather daunting prospect. The relatively high price may put it out of the reach of people who might wish to read it at their leisure.

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### **Interventions for Children of Divorce: Custody, Access, and Psychotherapy.** By WILLIAM F. HODGES. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons. 1986. Pp 374. £38.50.

This book aims to provide principles and guidelines for professionals working with children of divorce. The author has reviewed a large number of studies, but he points out that these are mostly descriptive and largely methodologically inadequate. However, the intervention strategies are clearly illustrated with examples, and these provide a valuable resource.

The impact of divorce on children is different depending on the age of the child. Hodges argues that we need to consider the characteristics of the child and their circumstances in order to establish what one would expect the child to understand and cope with. The theoretical basis of this work is developmental, and strongly based in object relations and Piagetian theory. Within this model the impact and long-term adjustment to divorce is considered.

There are chapters on medication, custody, visitation, and single parenthood as any clinical intervention should be placed in the context of the effects of different ways families reach their present status. The chapter on mediation is particularly important, as the evidence reviewed suggests that it is superior to court-resolved

battles for all concerned. It is also argued that whatever post-divorce arrangements are made for children should be monitored and evaluated. With the high rate of remarriage the author has also reviewed work in this area, as clinicians often find themselves working with such families.

The second half of the book presents various models of intervention, including individual, group, and family therapy. Each approach is carefully considered and illustrated. At the end of the book Hodges provides a list of things that are not known and need to be known when helping children of divorce: there are thus plenty of suggestions for future research.

This book is well written and easy to use as a reference book – in view of the price this seems the most likely use. The fact that the research and practices reported are from America should not deter the British reader.

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**Attempted Suicide: A Practical Guide to its Nature and Management** (2nd ed). By KEITH HAWTON and JOSE CATALAN. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1987. Pp 211. £12.50.

The second edition of this readable book is a little larger than the first. Its main format remains the same, and it is still the most useful basic text on 'attempted suicide' which is currently available. It is valuable at several levels, from a basic guide to practical management to a good summary of recent research work.

The new additions to the text reflect various recent changes in the clinical scene. Problems concerning unemployment, child abuse, adolescence, the role of psychotropic drug prescription, and up-to-date epidemiological findings are discussed in detail. The new DHSS guidelines on the management of deliberate self-harm are also mentioned, although it would have been useful to see them in their entirety. One omission concerns the recommendations that multidisciplinary standing committees should be established in each major clinical centre, charged with the tasks of monitoring standards of care and establishing codes of clinical practice, as well as methods of education and stimulating research. One wonders how widely this idea has been implemented throughout the country.

The book closes with consideration of the way forward and the many problems which beset primary prevention of 'attempted suicide'. It is indeed a source of disappointment that no research has yet shown any form of intervention to be effective in reducing repetition, and we are still in the early stages of identifying key issues in primary prevention of 'attempted suicide'. The exhausted casualty officer, facing yet another overdose patient, may still feel justified in believing that punitive stomach washouts could be effective as a way of preventing further repetition. In due course further enquiry

will surely prove him wrong, and any aspiring researcher will find within this book many good ideas which deserve further exploration.

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**In-Patient Psychiatry: Diagnosis and Treatment** (2nd edition). Edited by LLOYD I. SEDERER. London: Williams & Wilkins. 1986. Pp 399. £45.00.

At a time when community psychiatry is fashionable it is curiously anachronistic to find a book which is almost entirely devoted to in-patient psychiatry. Yet even day-patient care receives only a brief comment here. The narrow focus does enable certain aspects of in-patient care to be discussed in more detail than is found in general psychiatric textbooks, but the multi-author nature of the book has resulted in a considerable amount of repetition. Young psychiatric trainees are often puzzled by what actually happens in a psychiatric ward and may be uncertain about how they should spend the individual time that they have with their patients, what community and staff meetings are about, and what the aims of in-patient group psychotherapy should be. Some attempt is made here to provide the psychiatrist in training with advice and clear guidelines, and the chapters devoted to group therapy, the therapeutic milieu, and the family are particularly well-written.

Unfortunately, much of the detailed factual information one would also expect to find in such a text is only sketchily presented, and there is much that British psychiatrists would take issue with; for example, the chapter on schizophrenia uncritically presents the views of such workers as Wynne and Singer, and is heavily biased towards psychotherapeutic management. Somewhat paradoxically, another chapter, devoted to the use of the laboratory, dogmatically recommends a number of "diagnostic" biochemical tests such as the dexamethasone suppression test, again without discussing any of the controversy surrounding their use. Considering that the book is dealing with in-patient treatment, ECT is dealt with inadequately and cognitive therapy only briefly mentioned. One is left to wonder whether this is to be thought of exclusively as an out-patient technique! The chapter on alcoholism fails to discuss aims other than abstinence in any depth, and the drug addictions are notable by their absence altogether.

Overall, the book would be of limited value to those preparing for the membership examination, but the sections dealing with interpersonal and social aspects of in-patient care probably make it a worthwhile addition to a psychiatric library.

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