

Book Reviews

PRISONS

Medical Care of Prisoners and Detainees. Ciba Foundation Symposium 16 (New Series). Amsterdam: Elsevier/Excerpta Medica/North-Holland. 1973. Pp. viii+230. Index 7 pp. Price Dfl. 30.50.

This collection of conference papers describes the medical facilities, or lack of them, in prisons and detention camps in various countries. It is a mine of recondite information. Nowhere, it seems, are the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (1955) wholeheartedly implemented. Professor G. O. W. Mueller, writing about the United States, describes the 'deplorable conditions' revealed in a survey of a Federal Detention Headquarters in New York City. He comments on the 'antediluvian theme of the "hands off" doctrine', which prevents the courts from reviewing the policies of correctional institutions. 'Such judicial passivity towards prisoners' grievances, coupled with the present use of "outrageous" deprivation as a test of standard, indicates that the desirable Standard Minimum Rules have not yet been complied with by one of the most highly developed judicial systems in the world.'

Judicial control of abuses, and democratic control of prison policies, are everywhere hampered by the secrecy which detaining authorities invariably try to maintain. In political detention camps, as opposed to established prison systems, the situation is even more difficult on account of the obscurity of the criteria for detention and the uncertainty about duration.

As individuals, doctors are likely to disapprove of the barbarity of prison regimes and deplore physical assaults on inmates, whether perpetrated unofficially or in the guise of legal punishment. It does not necessarily follow that ethical considerations should dictate withdrawal of medical services, since that could cause inmates to suffer an additional deprivation. The presence of doctors within the system can have an important humanising effect. Medical men who struggle on in unfavourable circumstances, and perform such distasteful tasks as the supervision of floggings or executions should not be condemned too hastily.

The papers draw attention to the difficulties, even under relatively ideal conditions, of providing a normal medical and psychiatric service for prisoners.

Loss of liberty, and the restrictive environment of institutions, leads inevitably to stress, to self absorption, to hypochondriasis and to the attempt to manipulate medical facilities to overcome boredom, dietary restrictions and other painful aspects of penal life. Prison medicine, and especially prison psychiatry, has to contend with the effect of an artificial and generally adverse environment upon the prisoner's ordinary problems of physical and mental health.

In closing the conference, the chairman, Dr. Storr, appealed to persons with knowledge of prisons to do their utmost, within the limitations of the Official Secrets Act and other rules, to produce well-informed books and articles. This could help promote an enlightened public opinion and thereby bring influence to bear upon governments to improve prison standards.

D. J. WEST.

BRAIN ELECTROPHYSIOLOGY

Evoked Potentials in Psychology, Sensory Physiology and Clinical Medicine. By D. REGAN. London: Chapman and Hall. 1972. Pp. xv+328. Index 10 pp. Price £6.00.

The study of evoked EEG activity is of increasing interest in psychophysiology. Over the past decade intriguing associations have been established between the properties of the stimulus used and the evoked cerebral response and also between the latter and certain characteristics of the subject's state of mind, such as his level of vigilance, expectancy and attentiveness to the stimulus. These observations have nourished the hope that the technique might shed some welcome light on the neurophysiology of psychiatric disorders.

However, the research worker entering the field or attempting to assess what it might have to offer is confronted by a disconcerting number of often contradictory reports. It is for such a reader that Dr. Regan has written this admirable guide. He devotes chapters to evoked potentials in relation to the electrical activity of single neurons, sensory information processing and psychological variables; in Chapter 5 he deals with experimental techniques and apparatus. The text is lucid, well ordered, meticulously documented and full of authoritative information. His condensed review of the clinical applications (Chapter 4) may leave some readers hankering