

Book reviews

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Schizophrenia: Concepts and Clinical Management. By E. Johnstone, M. Humphreys, F. Lang, S. Lawrie and R. Sandler. (Pp. 271; £45.00.) Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. 1999.

This is a useful book that is worth having in post-graduate libraries. It is a series of reviews by Professor Johnstone and her colleagues in Edinburgh, covering many aspects of this important topic. All the chapters are well written, and most are well referenced.

As might be expected from Professor Johnstone's many contributions to the study of the schizophrenic syndromes, this book presents a definite viewpoint, best illustrated by her own comment at the end of the chapter on the concept; 'We still have the same difficulty that Kraepelin had; we believe we are defining an entity which will be shown to have a tangible underlying morbid process, but we cannot demonstrate the process'. More than once, a well-known paper by Weinberger is quoted which contains the telling phrase '... increasingly compelling scientific evidence that schizophrenia is a brain disorder'.

All the authors manage to convey their hopes and expectations that the real solutions will come from studies of brain structure or brain neurotransmitters, but yet are quite honest about the still elusive nature of anything 'tangible'. The book is, indeed, a good illustration of the triumph of optimism over 100 years of frustration and disappointment.

There are, of course, other viewpoints about the nature of the schizophrenic syndromes that are not prominent in this book. One such can be demonstrated by avoiding the term 'schizophrenia' and using only the less attractive 'schizophrenic syndromes'. This is not a popular suggestion, but it avoids the false reassurance that there is only one 'entity' or disease process to be discovered.

The chapters that deal with brain amines, neuropathology, brain imaging and neuro-

psychology are the heart of the book, and are up-to-date with many references. But faced with what seems to be a mass of evidence, a note of caution is justified. The majority of the hundreds of studies quoted share a problem about what is the meaning of a difference between two groups that reaches the conventional 1 in 20 level. This is to do with the disappointing fact that a property of a group (such as a group mean) cannot necessarily be extended to all members of that group. This is rarely mentioned. The clinical significance of many of these studies would be more clear if, every time a study is reported that finds some slight abnormality of brain structure or function (usually of unknown importance) to be present in a statistically significant proportion of persons with a schizophrenic syndrome, the finding should be immediately followed by clear statements of how many of those same persons did not have the abnormality (usually it will be a surprising number), and how many of the comparison group did have it (again, often a surprising number). This information can usually be deduced from the papers, but is rarely given the prominence it deserves. In other words, up to now the findings that keep the enthusiasts going are usually findings about abnormalities of obscure significance, present in only some of the subjects studied, that give only clues about possible underlying processes. It is no more justified to speak of 'compelling scientific evidence' than it is to assume that there is only one disorder to be elucidated.

Some of the deficiencies of this book come from the particular approach already noted. The chapters that cover social issues and epidemiology are short, and cross-cultural studies are given only brief mention. It is a pity that the fascinating puzzle posed by high rates among British citizens who are second and third generation children of Afro-Caribbean immigrants is hardly discussed at all.

Professor Johnstone and her colleagues run a clinical service in addition to conducting research, and their experience shows in the very useful chapters on problems to do with service provision, clinical issues, the economics of treat-

ment, and some legal and ethical points.

In the opinion of this reviewer, a more realistic but also more depressing view of the nature of the schizophrenic syndromes is that we simply do not know enough to have a definite view. Research into a variety of possible types of contributory causes at different conceptual levels must continue – structural, biochemical, interpersonal, social and cultural – and preferably into more than one possible cause on the same subjects at the same time. We must always be prepared to admit that in most persons who develop a schizophrenic syndrome, not even one

of the known contributory causes is present. Indeed, Professor Johnstone herself makes a closely related point when discussing genetic issues ‘Eighty-nine per cent of patients have parents who are not schizophrenic – 81% have no affected first-degree relative, and 63% will show no family history of the disease whatsoever’. But having said this, we must be grateful to hard-working and honest enthusiasts like Professor Johnstone, and hope that they will continue their efforts. To discover anything about these illnesses is a gain, and it will all fit together one day.

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