

Book Reviews

Perceptions, and Politics’—held under the auspices of the European Association for the History of Medicine and Health in 1999. With one exception—that of Kearns and Laxton, whose piece is on the mid-nineteenth century—the essays focus, to varying degrees, on the first half of the twentieth century. Aside from the Introduction by the editor, the book is divided into two sections: ‘Local contexts, international settings’ and ‘The international theatre and the locus of expertise’. The former contains essays by Gerry Kearns and Paul Laxton (on the Famine Irish in Liverpool); Pedro Samblás Tilve (on drug use in early twentieth-century Spain); Alfredo Menéndez Navarro (on the debate over the dangers of asbestos in Britain in the 1930s); and Shirish Naresh Kavadi (on the hookworm campaign in 1920s Madras). As the section title suggests, these essays seek, as it happens successfully, to locate particular local issues in a much broader context. So, for example, as Kearns and Laxton point out in their thought-provoking essay, the handling of Irish Famine victims by the authorities in Liverpool was “not just a local affair, nor was it a crude reaction to an alien horde that could be described in terms of class” (p. 34). Rather, it showed how the cosmopolitan city of Liverpool reacted in a complex way to a group whose status was highly ambiguous both in the city itself and in the wider polity which then constituted the United Kingdom.

The second section comprises pieces of a more overtly international character: by Paul Weindling (on the “new public health” of the first half of the twentieth century); John Hutchinson (on international movements in child health in the 1920s); Gabriele Moser and Jochen Fleischhacker (on the modernization of social hygiene in Weimar Germany); Marcos Cueto (on social medicine in the Andes, 1920–1950); Lion Murard and Patrick Zylberman (on French social medicine in its international context in the 1930s); and James Gillespie (on international health from the perspective of social security and social medicine). As with the previous section, it is invidious to single out any one contribution. But it is perhaps worth mentioning the essay by the late John Hutchinson. As he rightly points

out, the impact of the First World War on children and their health was immense, and the inter-war period saw a range of initiatives, by both official and voluntary bodies, designed to alleviate child suffering. These took place at both national and international levels, with perhaps the most famous of the latter being the Declaration of the Rights of the Child passed by the League of Nations in 1924. The actual success of these initiatives, though, is another matter, about which Hutchinson displays a justified scepticism. This illustrates, *inter alia*, all too clearly the difficulties inherent in seeking to improve health—and of course here there are endless problems of definition—at an international level.

This collection of essays, to which this review has in such a short space done scant justice, deserves a wide readership. The editor is to be commended in bringing these papers to publication in this admirable series. The Introduction concludes by saying that the collection “is designed to enhance our understanding of modern society and elucidate the cultural meaning of medicine as a historical agent, and, above all, to raise many more questions than answers” (p. 7). There is no doubt that these are important contributions in themselves to understanding health in its international context; and, moreover, will provide a platform for future debate, discussion, and research.

John Stewart,
Oxford Brookes University

Barbara Bridgman Perkins, *The medical delivery business: health reform, childbirth, and the economic order*, New Brunswick, and London, Rutgers University Press, 2004, pp. xii, 253, £31.95 (hardback 0-8135-3328-7).

Health care consultant Barbara Bridgman Perkins is one of the original members of the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective and a contributor to *Our bodies, ourselves*. First published as a booklet in 1970, *Our bodies, ourselves* aimed to provide women with the

Book Reviews

information they needed in order to participate in medical decision-making about their bodies. The Women's Liberation Movement was on the crest of a wave, and the emphasis of the book was squarely on women "reclaiming" their bodies from a male-dominated medical profession. An area of particular concern to feminists at the time was the medical treatment of women in childbirth. Feminist activists and scholars blamed excessive intervention on patriarchal doctors. Male dominance of obstetrics, it was claimed, drove clinical practice, leading to the adoption of techniques of no proven benefit to either the mother or her infant.

In *The medical delivery business* Bridgman Perkins revisits that debate from the vantage point of the twenty-first century and her considerable experience as a health planner. Her cleverly titled book rejects the assumption that male dominance adequately explains excessive obstetrical intervention. Bridgman Perkins suggests instead that developments in perinatal care since 1900 should be explored within a different framework: the production side of the organization of medicine.

Using examples from maternal and infant care, she argues that throughout the twentieth century industrial and commercial enterprises provided models for the institutions, specialties and technological developments of modern medicine. Scientific management techniques were first applied to clinical medicine in the early 1900s, favouring the development of a hierarchical division of medical labour and the subdivision of clinical care into separate tasks assigned to different levels of hospital staff. Surgical and technological interventions were introduced in order to enhance productivity and speed of clinical process. In early twentieth-century America, labour and delivery units were constructed along the lines of industrial production, and the slow and careful delivery of the baby's head, without inflicting injury to the mother, was replaced by a quick episiotomy. At Dublin's National Maternity Hospital in the 1960s, consultant obstetrician Kieran O'Driscoll pioneered the strategy of managing labour with oxytocin acceleration as a cost-efficient procedure aimed at rationalizing workloads and

removing bottlenecks in the flow of patients through the unit. Thus Bridgman Perkins also makes the very important point that business principles do not enhance efficiency without impinging on the clinical content and practice of medicine: the practice, the science and the business of medicine are all inextricably bound up together.

Can anything be done to correct the warping of maternity care? This question is especially pertinent at a time of increasing concern about escalating rates of caesarean section. Bridgman Perkins does not believe that the consumer-oriented approach championed by feminist activists and health reformers provides an adequate response to the industrialization of childbirth. She argues instead for reforms based on human health needs rather than on market economics, with an emphasis on equity of access, appropriateness of intervention, and caring. In putting forward these proposals, she echoes other twentieth-century critics of modern biomedicine, who in different ways have advocated a more patient-centred approach to health care.

Bridgman Perkins is a health planner, not a trained historian. This shows through in the way secondary sources are cited and integrated into the main discussion. But the book is painstakingly researched and generally well written. The author deserves high praise for producing an intelligent, thought-provoking and insightful account of the business approach in medicine. Anyone working on the history of twentieth-century maternity care will find *The medical delivery business* an invaluable addition to the existing literature on the subject.

Ornella Moscucci,

London School of Hygiene and Tropical
Medicine

D A Christie and E M Tansey (eds),
Leukaemia, transcript of a Witness Seminar held on 15 May 2001, Wellcome Witnesses to Twentieth Century Medicine, vol. 15, London, Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL, 2003, pp. ix, 85, £10.00 (paperback 0-85484-087-7).