

Book Review

Ethnic Factors in Health and Disease. J. K. CRUICKSHANK, D. G. BEEVERS, eds.
334 pp. London: Wright, 1989 (£39.50)

Those jokes in English popular culture that start 'An Englishman, a Scotsman and an Irishman...' reveal three truths about race that also apply to epidemiology. First, differences between races are due to their separation by geography; second, we make value judgements about races, sometimes ranking one race above another; and third, we tend to study differences in men more often than in women. In this important new book the editors, Drs Cruickshank and Beevers, collect together epidemiological studies of race. Investigating populations by what they choose to call 'ethnic' factors, looking at geographical origin, cultural patterns and genetic inheritance, they show that epidemiological studies of race can contribute new understanding to basic biological and health questions.

It is remarkable that this is the first British book to address ethnic issues in medicine. (More has been written on health care and health education for settled migrant groups.) The editors have not sought to produce a systematic text, but to draw on the work of a large range of colleagues, mainly in Britain, to present clinical epidemiology—which, they say, means 'approaching disease in individuals with a population perspective'. Laboratory investigations are related directly to clinical diseases, for example Dr Cruickshank's own studies of HTLV-1 in Afro-Caribbean patients. Field epidemiology is described, for example Dr Poulter's innovative studies monitoring blood pressures in Kenyan migrants to Nairobi. And there are chapters describing the services that have been created through patient participation, especially for sickle-cell disease (Dr Anionwu) and thalassaemia (Dr Modell). With chapters on infections, pregnancy, ischaemic heart disease, nutritional studies and mental illness, it is evident that many current health issues are being fruitfully investigated through an ethnic perspective.

Yet, being medical, the book is also curiously naïve in one area, revealed in the single chapter given to 'sociology'. In her contribution, Dr Pearson starts with the important criticism of epidemiology that it separates individuals within populations, attributing to them 'factors' (age, sex, ethnicity) that allow statistical manipulation but offer little insight into the complex causal mechanisms of social life. But she then offers another set of categories—census indicators of deprivation, such as occupational status, unemployment, housing and household structure. Since everyone agrees that 'ethnicity' is more than genetic difference, and has a substantial contribution from social behaviour, much more understanding is needed about how people within diverse cultures relate with each other—the microsociology of class, religion, environment, language and the family. If the scientists can come out of their laboratories to join with sociologists in real multidisciplinary studies, the rewards will be immense.

This is an enjoyable and stimulating book, broad enough in scope to be of interest to all clinicians and epidemiologists. It is nicely produced, up to date and a reasonable price—well worth buying now.

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