



on behind the scenes, this book is fascinating and easy to read. The story of the BSE debacle in the United Kingdom provides plenty to think about in the Canadian context, since “there was silence from the Canadian government — and there is still silence.” The chapters are well researched, in the scientific literature, in the policy documents and statements which have (or have not) been promulgated, and in media reports.

The only disappointment in *Mad Cows and Mother's Milk* is that the authors did not develop a strategy for risk communication, specifically using one of the issues. Otherwise, it is a well written account of what not to do to inspire public confidence when dealing with highly charged health issues. Those whose job it is to regulate products with possible health implications or whose job it is to deal with public fears over these products, should make it a point to read this book.

Ian M. Gemmill, MD, DPH, CCFP
Acting Medical Officer of Health
Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox
and Addington Health Unit
Kingston, Ont.

The Cultural Context of Health, Illness, and Medicine

Martha O. Loustaunau, Elisa J. Sobó. 232 pp. Bergin & Garvey, Westport, Conn. 1997. US\$59.95. ISBN 0-89789-487-1

Overall rating: Good
Strengths: Excellent introduction to sociological and anthropological concepts as they pertain to medicine; well referenced
Weaknesses: Outdated portrayal of some aspects of medical practice; failure to address in depth the problem of cultural relativism and conflicting values; not enough examples
Audience: Medical, nursing and other health sciences students; practising physicians; nurses interested in this topic

Considering the current emphasis on evidence-based medicine, it is refreshing to read about the importance of the art of medicine for a change. “The art of medicine is the art of human relationships and communication and, most of all, caring.” (p. 188) Loustaunau, a medical sociologist, and Sobó, a medical anthropologist, present a brief overview of the history of biomedicine (defined as the dominant medical system, focused on physiological processes) from the vantage point of their respective fields. They make the case for the importance of cultural awareness in developing caring human relationships with our increasingly diverse patient populations, and they introduce methods that can help improve communication with our patients.

This book would be appropriate for an undergraduate course in medical anthropology. Each chapter begins with stated goals and ends with discussion questions. The basic concepts of culture, social structure and life stages are introduced in the first 3 chapters, with discussion about how each of these influences our positions and interactions with regard to our health, illness, care-seeking and delivery of health care.

The concept of cultural relativism — “that we do not judge, but consider actions, beliefs, or traits within their own cultural contexts in order to better understand them” (p. 15) — is given little more than a page of discussion, and focuses solely on the issue of female genital mutilation. For physicians confronted with cultural beliefs and practices that may be harmful to patients, attempts to understand the place of such beliefs and practices in our patient's lives can be at odds with our own deeply held values of right and wrong. This issue deserves more in-depth coverage; for example, practical examples of how to balance cultural sensitivity with prevention and treatment of the harm caused by such practices, and discus-

sion of the legal implications for caregivers.

The chapter on “Health and illness over the life course” only skims the surface of such complex issues as the meaning and course of pregnancy and childbirth, childhood, adolescence, aging and death from a cultural perspective. The discussion of the “American birth ritual” is outdated, at least from the perspective of family medicine in Canada.

The second half of the book gives fascinating insights into biomedicine as a culture in itself. Examples of cultural misunderstandings that cause serious problems in the care of patients nicely illustrate the point that “belief can cure, and belief can kill” (p. 101).

For those hoping for practical information, perhaps the most useful parts of the book are the appendices, which include useful general references, Web sites and a list of journals that address this issue.

Maureen D. McCall, MD, CCFP, MPH

Family physician
Red Deer Regional Hospital
Red Deer, Alta.
Consultant
International Health Issues

Books and other media received

Livres et autres documents reçus

Anatomy

The Complete Visible Human: The Complete High-Resolution Male and Female Datasets from the National Library of Medicine's Visible Human Project.™ 2 CD-ROM package. H.-O. Peitgen, W. Berghorn, M. Biel. Over 7000 images. Springer-Verlag. 1998. ISBN 0-387-14247-9

Anesthesia

Sickle Cell Pain. S.K. Ballas. 379 pp. Illust. Vol. 11 of *Progress in Pain Research and Management Series*. IASP Press. 1998. US\$87. ISBN 0-931092-22-1