

THE TIMES HEALTH SUPPLEMENT 12.3.82

# BOOK REVIEWS

## Shouldering an unjust burden

Living with Childhood Cancer Edited by John L. Spinetta and Patricia Deasy-Spinetta C. V. Mosby £12.75 ISBN 0 801 64764 9

Aimed at those whose professional or private lives involve them in the care of children with cancer or other life-threatening or disabling diseases, this unusual multi-author book brings a refreshingly positive approach to the problems of coping with a distressing, disrupting and seemingly "unjust" burden that can fall at any time on any family where there are children.

The fact that cancer is the commonest cause of death among children under the age of 15 means

that many families at some time or other are forced to face events that previously they regarded as happening only to others. They have to adjust suddenly not only to the fact that they have a child who is going to suffer illness and perhaps die, but also to the stigma of having a weakling in their own nest for which others, in their ignorance, may silently blame them. Those who contributed to this book share the belief, first, that the fullest pursuit of life is a basic right of every person, including the young child with cancer and, second, that the very effort of trying to get the best out of life helps all concerned to adapt to circumstances which might otherwise seem just impossibly sad and hopeless.

In the book, childhood cancer is seen not only as a problem for the child concerned, but also one for their parents and brothers and sisters and for the rest of the child's social environment, including the school and the doctors and nurses who transfer their own sense of fear or hopelessness to the child not only do no good, but may themselves be in need of support and spiritual help. On the other hand, telling children in a hopeful way, is regarded as essential if trust is to be maintained.

In many ways this is typically American. Unconstrained by traditional approaches and interdisciplinary barriers, chapters by paediatricians, nurses, social workers, psychologists, hypnotists and professors of ethics are interspersed with edited records of group therapy sessions including affected children or their parents and with the description of the results of research projects. At first some of the research projects strike one as being all set simply to rediscover the wheel, but in fact all have some new and useful insight into the definition of problems and how best to cope with them.

A particularly fascinating chapter concerns what can be learnt from patients, or members of their families, about the extent to which they have adapted to their problems by the use of "kinetic family drawing". Subjects are asked to "Draw a picture of everyone in your family doing something". The resulting pictures are scored, not for artistic ability but for measures of cohesion and communication within the family, self-image and emotional tone. Illustrations based on the results of such a study are an attractive feature of the book.

Other chapters deal specifically with the burden of "non-medical" costs, the needs of siblings, the psychosocial needs of families who have lost a child from cancer, and communicating with and making the best arrangements for a child returning to school after an episode that may recur.

All in all this is a book by experienced, dedicated and compassionate people which will bring enlightenment and help to many who are faced with the problems of childhood cancer.

Francis J. C. Roe