REVIEWS

Doctors: The Lives and Work of GPs
Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy
London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984, 308 pp

"The aim of this book", states its author, is "to give as vivid and comprehensive a picture as possible of the lives and work of GPs". Vivid it certainly is; comprehensive it should not pretend to be. Yet on the strength of interviews with fifty very varied GPs, Gathorne-Hardy does tend to suggest that he has captured the essence of general practice. His book is a patchwork of interview transcripts, patterned both as themes (general practice in the past; sex-counselling; private practice; group practice; drug companies; money; social workers; the consultation; stress; ...) and as sketches of GPs and practices. These are stitched together with some woolly threads of history, sociology and psychology, along with a good deal of colourful narrative intended to convey the texture of GPs, their surgeries, practices and domestic lives.

This approach has its merits. It sometimes makes lively and enlightening reading, and the patchwork does eventually begin to portray - impressionistically - the human face of general practice, warts and all. If you would enjoy reading 300 pages of anecdotes and opinions in the best journalistic style of a Sunday colour supplement (sadly without the glossy photographs), then this is the book for you. However, if you are after accuracy, reliability or generalisable analysis, or if you want scholarly rather than idiosyncratic insights into general practice, then go elsewhere.

Personally, I had expected to get more than I did out of this wealth of surprisingly raw material, but felt frustrated by the book's undisciplined style and unrelenting superficiality. Superficiality is not a sin in itself, of course, but it should not pose as in-depth analysis, especially when laden with methodological, conceptual and factual deficiencies. In a book which purports to give an historical background to general practice, the few living reminiscences are far too sketchy to be taken seriously as oral history, and the account of the more distant past is, frankly, misleading. For example, there is no excuse for confusing the 1815 Apothecaries' Act with the 1858 Medical Act (p.283). Nor can one forgive Gathorne-Hardy's largely irrelevant lapse into the gory grave-robbing tales of Burke and Hare, if at the same time he fails to make any mention whatsoever of the massive Medical Reform movement, which led to the 1858 Act. It was that movement, after all, which strove to make general practice a respectable profession; and it was those battles with the hospital-oriented medical establishment, which led to the birth of the British Medical Association and the Lancet, both originally rallying points for radical and ambitious general practitioners who felt slighted by the 1815 Act.

The book's faults are not all due to the author. He has worked hard and almost lovingly (the dedication to his GP father is highly revealing) and has produced a wealth of interesting material. Nevertheless, he needed a firm editor to impose some rational structure, to insist on scholarly