

friends had had, say, cancer of the oesophagus or of the pancreas, they would have found the depressing truth that physicians know all too well: fewer than 10% of patients are alive after five years. Such facts, however, are what today's patients rightly demand to be told.

Other useful aspects of this book emerged when I used it to answer difficult questions. In the propaganda war over the current British epidemic of mad-cow disease (discussed with just the right amount of detail in the Manual), a spokeswoman on the radio claimed that everybody needed meat for total health. Minutes later, my daughter called me anxiously asking whether her two vegetarian sons would be all right. Reference to the Manual showed that they ate the right diet and had nothing to worry about. I get similarly anxious myself when American urologist friends argue with comparable hubris over screening for PSA (prostate specific antigen). A middle aged man who does not have such a yearly check-up is, in their view, signing his own death warrant from prostate cancer—yet in Europe we are not so sure. Commendably, with six mentions in its index and a good debate in the text, the *Merck Manual* reassures me that I should remain skeptical: "Although screening increase the chance of early detection," the discussion states, "it can also lead to costly and unnecessary diagnostic tests and treatment performed on the basis of a false-positive test."

So, did I catch the book out? As somebody who swims most days for fun, I thought I had detected an inconsistency: On page 275 it says that if weight loss is a main goal of exercise, then swimming isn't the best choice, whereas on page 657 it recommends it. Nevertheless, this hit was not quite on target, as the latter focuses on obesity in adolescents. But I did find that Merck would have left me in the lurch in not mentioning a psychogenic condition that marred my medical finals. Proctalgia fugax is an agonising intermittent spasm of the muscles of the lower bowel that is probably related to stress, may respond to amyl nitrite, and is fortunately evanescent. Once I passed my examinations I never had it again, but I have not forgotten the need for urgent reassurance, which my family doctor provided.

Quite possibly, proctalgia fugax is mentioned in the text somewhere and I failed to find it. Pyoderma gangrenosum is, after all, not included in the index, though it is discussed in the section on

ulcerative colitis. All this makes for a good case for a much longer index than the present 106 pages, particularly given the densely packed information in the 24 sections on definition, diagnosis, treatment and prognosis, as well as a myriad of other aspects of medicine—from the structure of a cell to living wills. There is an especially valuable section on children's health issues and even a diagram of the ozone layer. Thus, I found the new manual almost faultless. It opens flat at any page and is attractively laid out. The style is reader friendly with English of

high quality; here "data" are firmly plural and "none" is firmly singular (though I winced at the tautologous "skin rash." Rash, the *Oxford English Dictionary* states, is "a superficial eruption or efflorescence of the skin," while Dorland's dictionary defines it as "a temporary eruption on the skin." The new Merck is unique in not being yet another book on self-diagnosis or treatment, but a true manual of medicine for laypersons. I found it the most impressive book of its kind since *The Oxford Textbook of Medicine* appeared twenty years ago.

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

THE ETHICAL FRONTIERS OF BIOMEDICINE

By Arthur Caplan

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Arthur Caplan is perhaps the most quoted bioethicist in the US and this new collection of essays illustrates why. Written in the vernacular, it is a lucid, readable and comprehensive survey of the problems many of us face today by virtue of being human: death and dying, sickness and health care, and technology, to name but a few.

Caplan's style is conversational. Each chapter is short and expresses a point of view that is wholly his own. This is not a textbook and although it can be read by neophytes, the author does not take a value-neutral stance on any issue. The essays range from topics such as assisted reproduction, the use of fetal tissue for transplantation research, assisted suicide, cloning and gene therapy, and although they often present the arguments of other bioethicists, with citations and a bibliography for the student, they firmly present Caplan's opinion, often expressed with humor and always firmly stated.

The common thread linking the essays in this volume—many of which have appeared elsewhere in other forms—is that

a lack of trust, cynicism and pessimism, and America's overweening emphasis on personal freedom has caused "such nasty consequences ... for those facing ethical issues in health care." Indeed, of the four cardinal values in bioethics—autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence and justice—autonomy has been the victor, according to Caplan, with compassion and beneficence taking a back seat. The book makes a strong case for a collective change in attitude, both on the part of the individual and of institutions. Even bioethics—"no less afflicted with egoism than any other arena of life in the United States"—is not left out of the fray.

Each essay takes a slightly different tack in its exposition of a particular subject, so that the book has a variegated texture, making it a good read. Thus, whereas "Analogies to the Holocaust and Contemporary Bioethical Disputes about Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia" takes a heavy philosophical tone, proceeding methodically through logical arguments to the conclusion, other chapters are more historical, drawing heavily on case histories, such as

"Hard Cases Make Bad Law: The Legacy of the Baby Doe Controversy".

As bioethics is an interdisciplinary endeavor, Caplan's essays draw on a multiple of disciplines and points of view. Common to all, however, is an instructive and accessible tone, using not only the Socratic method of a series of questions and answers, but humor and a direct approach such that you get the impression that the author is speaking directly to you without speaking down to you.

