

BOOK REVIEWS

Small but Strong: Cultural Contexts of (Mal-) Nutrition among the Northern Kwanga (East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea)

BY BRIGIT OBRIST VAN EEUWIJK

Basel: Ethnologisches Seminar der Universität und Museum für Völkerkunde, 1992: 284 pages. Soft cover, illustrated.

The title of this book clearly implies its central theme, the cultural relativeness of the concept of malnutrition. The author presents one of the most complete discussions yet produced in a Papua New Guinean context of the disjunction between the local and biomedical views of proper child growth and nutrition. The book is a very well documented description of the ecological setting of child feeding and nutrition among the northern Kwanga, one of the many peoples in the Sepik region whose subsistence centres on yam cultivation. The breadth of information and detail acquired by the author, who describes her approach as nutritional anthropology, is remarkable. The food system of the northern Kwanga is set out within all its major parameters — environmental, economic, social and religious. Neither history nor contemporary aspects of social change is neglected. The biomedical assessment of nutritional status of children in this society is presented as the counter view, a view which states that the majority of children are mildly to moderately malnourished, with a significant minority severely malnourished. The author notes repeatedly how this assessment differs between mothers and maternal and child health (MCH) sisters and leads to very poor communication as well as disregard of the sound ecological and cultural rules by which the mothers are functioning.

The situation she describes is very common here in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Mothers depend largely on breastmilk to feed children until well into the first year of life. The author makes it clear that this practice is well supported by numerous beliefs and observations of Kwanga mothers and is hardly due to neglect or laziness. The functional consequences of slowly growing children, frequent illnesses and high levels of mortality

are recognized but explained in ways which do not consider nutrition as causal. Sorcery, breaking food or postpartum sex taboos, and other traditional beliefs serve to explain serious child illnesses and death. Child feeding is carried out within a framework of ideas and indicators related to features of motor and intellectual development of the child, as these are associated with the appropriate food groups and preparations. At around 4-6 months these are mostly soft and watery foods, such as green coconut meat and papaya. From 7-12 months, supplementary foods are expanded to include soup-like or premasticated versions of the basic starchy staples. Greens and animal proteins are left to be introduced later in the second year of life. Primary dependence is on breastfeeding especially during bouts of illness. As the children under 5 appear to be sick on average nearly 50% of their lives, this means that the loop feeds back in reinforcement, i.e. sick children eat less and poorly fed children are sick more often. As the author rightly points out, the end result is a cohort of short but generally healthy children after the age of 5. This occurs at a cost of the loss of about 20 in every 100 babies and a great deal of illness.

The dilemma of a nutritional system which appears well adapted to the needs of a people but which accomplishes this at a cost of high morbidity and mortality is the paramount operational problem of the concept of malnutrition. This book expounds in great detail how the Kwanga nutritional system works and why it is so well adapted to the environmental and social situation in which the people live. The other side of the coin, e.g. the cost to mothers of repeatedly sick children, the cost to the health services, the overall lower productivity of poorly nourished populations, is less well covered. The author offers no solutions, except to imply that MCH sisters

should understand more about the cultures in which they work and communicate about improving nutrition with greater respect for the mothers. Indeed, more creative solutions have rarely emerged in PNG and the situation described in this book remains a widespread one for which few answers have been found. 'Small but Strong' is well worth reading for all health workers in PNG and a must for those

who grapple with the nation's nutritional problems.

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Manson's Tropical Diseases, 20th edition

EDITED BY GORDON C. COOK

London: W.B. Saunders, 1996: 1779 pages. ISBN 0 7020 1764 7. Hard cover, illustrated. £85.00.

In the preface to the first edition in 1898, Dr Patrick Manson described his book as "a manual of the diseases of warm climates, of handy size, and yet giving adequate information... the exigencies of travel and of tropical life are, as a rule, incompatible with big volumes and large libraries". Almost 100 years after its first publication, the size of the book has increased so much that it is unlikely to fit either in the luggage of the western doctor flying to tropical countries, or on the rickety table of a health worker in a rural area of Papua New Guinea (PNG). Dr Gordon Cook, the first editor who does not belong to the Manson's family dynasty, managed a successful reshuffle for this 20th edition. He desired a 'radical overhaul' with a shift from 'tropical medicine' to 'medicine in the tropics'. Judged from the addresses of the 93 contributors (84 living in a temperate climate), the move is still timid. Although new chapters, such as Related Specialties in the Tropics, go definitely in the desired direction, much of the approach is still traditional. To be more useful for health workers in the tropics, the book could have included chapters on rural health, and on the specific management of tropical diseases in areas with low resources in terms of staff, equipment, drugs etc. Much of the content of the book has been sensibly reorganized and carefully rewritten. Indeed, only 9 out of the 93 contributors of the present edition also wrote in the previous one in 1987. A few chapters have remained almost unchanged, which is easily understandable for the description of clinical features or life cycles, but is disappointing for

other chapters that would at least have benefited from an updated bibliography. For example, the most recent reference in the Dermatological Problems chapter is dated 1984 and in Arbovirus Infections 1986. Not surprisingly most of the authors tend to focus their contribution on their favorite topic. This is true even for the editor himself, who gives full details on the development of tropical disease in London, which is of marginal interest for the health worker in the tropics (Section 1, chapter 1), and increases the number of pages devoted to the small intestine from 3 pages in 1987 to 19 pages in 1996 (Section 2B, chapter 3).

This 1779-page book is divided into 5 sections and 83 chapters. Section 1 (11pp) gives a summary of the history of Tropical Medicine and Medicine in the Tropics. Section 2 is in two parts: A) Symptoms and signs (14pp) and B) System-oriented diseases (364pp). Most of the chapters of section B are closely based on the previous edition with the inclusion of much new information. Special applause should be given to the authors of Gastroenterological Problems, Haematological Diseases, Renal Diseases and Ophthalmology. Section 3 (42pp) describes the special aspects of paediatrics, surgery, obstetrics and gynaecology in the tropics. These new chapters deserve more space since they are most useful for medical staff working in areas with limited resources. Section 4 (206pp) includes all unclassable topics under the heading Environmental/Genetic Disorders, such as

travel medicine, heat stress, high altitude problems, nutrition, animal toxins, malignancies, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, podoconiosis and familial Mediterranean fever. The chapter on venomous snakes has been enriched with the information gained from studies conducted recently in PNG, and is always striking by the quality of the iconography. In the chapter on malignancies, it is to be deplored that there is a complete absence of any advice on pain management in the tropics, as unfortunately this is often the only intervention that can be offered to cancer patients in areas with low resources.

The incidence of noncommunicable diseases increases in countries in the transitional phases of development; the editor sensibly added three new chapters on the subject to account for these recent trends. Again information on the management of these diseases, for example ischaemic heart disease, in conditions encountered in nonsophisticated hospitals would have been useful but is lacking.

Section 5 represents quantitatively the most important part of the book (934pp). It is divided into 7 subsections. Section 5A deals with viral diseases. Viral hepatitis, EBV virus, dengue fever, as well as viruses affecting the respiratory tract, the skin and the central nervous system, are all dealt with in separate chapters in this edition. Rickettsial infections form section 5B and bacterial infections section 5C. The latter contains new chapters which are most welcome such as Resistant Gut Bacteria. Most of the other chapters of this section have been remarkably updated. Section 5D includes the mycotic infections. Section 5E, which embraces all protozoan infections, is certainly one of the best. The chapter on malaria, completely rewritten, also deserves special applause. It includes all the certainties about the disease but also all present controversies, for example about the pathogenesis of cerebral malaria or about chemoprophylaxis. It contains the highest number of references (439) and the most recent ones (although I could not find the corresponding numbers in the text for the last four). Section 5F describes helminthic infections and 5G ectoparasites.

As in the previous editions, the last part of the book consists of appendices (205pp), which

mainly describe the morphology of the vectors and parasites as well as the life cycles of the latter. The chapters on medical helminthology and entomology are almost similar to those in the previous editions, whereas the one on protozoa has been rewritten and shortened to avoid repetition of information already given in the main section. A welcome addition in the appendices of the present edition is the chapter on the immunological aspects of tropical diseases. Although a great deal of new information on the subject has already been given in the previous sections, this chapter summarizes the difficult concept of protective and nonprotective immunity, as well as immunopathology, which is constantly debated among experts. The chapter on radiology and imaging services, also new, is not extensive enough, especially on the proven usefulness of ultrasonography in the tropics. Surprisingly the index is shorter in the 20th edition than in the 19th (approximately 5000 words vs 10 000). Whether there are any adverse effects from the shortening of the index can only be ascertained once the new edition is being used.

Besides the numerous improvements in the content mentioned earlier, I must add an additional word for the presentation. The new edition is easier to read and visually clearer, mainly because of a larger font, better layout, and bigger and bolder titles. In comparison to the previous edition, is something lacking in this 20th edition? Yes. Inevitably in such an enterprise of update and renewal, some good things disappear. I regret the numerous charts of fever, some replaced by illegible photos of a patient file. Even if the charts of fever were stereotyped, they are certainly useful for teaching purposes. I also deplore the disappearance of advice on the management of epidemics, cholera and plague for example, two diseases which have been again on the front page recently. The final criticism concerns the content. Because of the layout of the presentation, which is not only by disease, but also by symptoms and signs, as well as by system and by parasite (in the wide sense of the term), numerous repetitions occur, of which some are minor but others quite significant. For example, we can read three times about the management of diarrhoea, and often twice about a parasite life cycle; the same photo even appears twice in the book (figure 74.1 p1478 and figure III.48 p1611).

The few criticisms, comments and suggestions made above should not deter from the warm praise which deservedly goes to the editor, authors and publishers of this great achievement. 'Manson' was and continues to be indisputably *The Bible* of tropical diseases. All clinicians interested in the field or working in warm climates should have access to this comprehensive book. Its relatively low cost (85 Pounds) should allow medical students or other health workers to benefit from it too. And, if

you are tired of reading it, you can still use it as a paper-weight, as a cyclone won't blow it away...

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