Round the World

From our Correspondents

United States

DISHONEST STUDENTS

The intensity of competition to gain entrance to a medical school has often been commented on and concern has been felt at unethical conduct before entrance—cheating, stealing notes, and sabotaging other students' experiments. Having been accepted, there is, in most cases, no standard for the examinations of the National Board of Medical Examiners. At this level, the students of the medical schools in the US are joined by those from overseas or offshore medical schools, and immigrants hoping to practise, lucratively, in the States. Only with these hurdles passed, including the Flex examination for foreign medical graduates, can graduates hope to reap the golden harvest unless they present false credentials. The extent of such fraud is so widespread that colleges, medical schools, and immigrants are deluged with misleading news about the benefits and risks of any kind of allergic reaction. This judgment is based on faulty information based not on clinical trials but on (sometimes obsolete) reports of experimental pharmacology—a direct and dangerous consequence of West Germany's attitude to controlled studies. Economic data are accurate, but the reader is in no position to weigh costs against benefits when the other information is so impressionistic. For example, all antihistamines are dismissed as weakly and unreliablely effective, therefore seldom useful; so the advice is not to take them in any kind of allergic reaction. This judgment is based on faulty citation of the pharmacological textbook, neglect of the verdict of the transparenz-telegram, and complete failure to notice recently published trials on allergic rhinitis and anaphylactoid reactions.

Why is this book a best-seller? Not only patients but also doctors are deluged with misleading news about the benefits and risks of drugs, and there is undoubtedly a need for terse, simple critical guide for doctors and consumers published by a private drug information agency in West Berlin. In clearly laid out tables the book offers simple value judgments on each drug including classification under the headings "general useful", "useful only in limited conditions", "barely useful", and "not useful but dangerous" (in which case the reader is advised not to take it). Additional tables carry information (some of it never intended for the public eye) on the economics of each drug including worth of business and number of packages sold in 1981, on the contents of a single package in the chemist's shop, on different formulations, and on whether it is prescription-only or over-the-counter. The Austrian authors—two journalists, a sociologist, and a chemist who was formerly sales manager in a West German pharmaceutical company—have written a previous best-seller, Gesunde Geschäfte, which revealed shady practices in the pharmaceutical industry and published confidential letters between companies and doctors (mainly academicians).

What should we make of this enterprise? For the doctors being pilloried it is difficult to take a detached view, but the information does seem deficient in many ways. Disease presentation and severity are not discussed; incidence and extent of drug effects (whether beneficial or adverse) are not specified; and statements tend to be based not on clinical trials but on (sometimes obsolete) reports of experimental pharmacology—a direct and dangerous consequence of West Germany's attitude to controlled studies. Economic data are accurate, but the reader is in no position to weigh costs against benefits when the other information is so impressionistic. For example, all antihistamines are dismissed as weakly and unreliablely effective, therefore seldom useful; so the advice is not to take them in any kind of allergic reaction. This judgment is based on faulty citation of the pharmacological textbook, neglect of the verdict of the transparenz-telegram, and complete failure to notice recently published trials on allergic rhinitis and anaphylactoid reactions. Why is this book a best-seller? Not only patients but also doctors are deluged with misleading news about the benefits and risks of drugs, and there is undoubtedly a need for terse, simple information. The firm pronouncements of Bittere Pillen may be wrong sometimes, but there is an empirical and critical guide for doctors and consumers published by a private drug information agency in West Berlin. In clearly laid out tables the book offers simple value judgments on each drug including classification under the headings "general useful", "useful only in limited conditions", "barely useful", and "not useful but dangerous" (in which case the reader is advised not to take it). Additional tables carry information (some of it never intended for the public eye) on the economics of each drug including worth of business and number of packages sold in 1981, on the contents of a single package in the chemist's shop, on different formulations, and on whether it is prescription-only or over-the-counter. The Austrian authors—two journalists, a sociologist, and a chemist who was formerly sales manager in a West German pharmaceutical company—have written a previous best-seller, Gesunde Geschäfte, which revealed shady practices in the pharmaceutical industry and published confidential letters between companies and doctors (mainly academicians).

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