

Who Cares For The Caregivers?

1. *Fears Beyond Control* by Ko SM (Armour Publishing, 1995), 2. *One Too Many* by Kua EH (Armour Publishing, 1995), 3. *The Troubled Mind* by Kua EH, Tian CS & Chan SL (Armour Publishing, 1995), 4. *The Autumn Years* by Kua EH, Lee KS & Pang WS (Armour Publishing, 1995)

It was with great anticipation that I picked up these books for review. How often in our family practice have we met with, and had to deal with, the following scenarios:

- 1) The lady with persistent insomnia (who actually had underlying depression because her husband drank a little too much)
- 2) The husband with sexual difficulties (whose wife bathes four times every night for an hour each time and washes herself incessantly)
- 3) The mother with non-ulcer dyspepsia (whose schizophrenic only child took four hours to feed at each meal)

These problems are hardly the sort that medical school prepares us doctors to handle, let alone the caregivers. Caregivers are therefore a highly neglected group, who continuously sweat and toil, day after day, cooking and cleaning, changing and feeding, enforcing medication regimes, caring and enduring it all.

These four 'self help' books, based on the unique Singaporean experience, written by local practitioners versed in psychiatry, are hence a welcome addition to any doctor's library and also a useful aid for both the patients and their caregivers. These books are written with little medical jargon and incorporate a lot of 'common-sense' advice; the practical insights offered help readers to see the difficulties faced by such patients and their caregivers in a different light.

Fears Beyond Control

Dr Ko looks at obsessive compulsive disorders (OCD), a situation where obsessive thoughts and compulsive rituals affect a patient's life, work, family and general well-being. He provides sufferers easy 'help yourself' steps and touches on the ways that the families can understand, cope and live with patients with this condition. Phrased in a question and answer format, he deals with queries such as how to recognise OCD, theories of its causes and treatment programmes.

One Too Many

Prof Kua tells readers about alcohol, its physical, psychiatric and social effects, and also provides tips on how to control its intake and ways to cope with the problem. He gives suggestions on how families can prepare the alcoholic for treatment and how to support them through treatment. He includes a brief Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (MAST) for readers who wish to determine if they or their loved ones may be having 'one too many'.

The Troubled Mind

This book is written primarily for caregivers and identifies the 'crisis in caring', the problem faced by caregivers in managing and caring for patients with mental illnesses at home. It emphasizes the importance of family support and how support of these families can enable the patients and their caregivers to lead as normal a life as they possibly can. It is encouraging for caregivers to know there are concerned practicing physicians who understand and empathize with them, that they are not alone in their trials and difficulties, and that there are ways to help both the caregiver and the patient have a better quality of life.

The editors have included short chapters covering a wide spectrum of common mental disorders, such as phobias, schizophrenia, OCD and mental handicap. Each chapter describes the nature of the disorders in simple terms as well as offers advice on treatment plans and how families can help in the treatment.

The Autumn Years

This is a well categorised guide that provides caregivers of the elderly with essential information on common medical problems faced by this group of patients. It also contains sections on understanding the elderly, their changing physical, mental, social and nutritional needs, and how these changes affect the family. In addition, this book addresses the roles, stresses and needs of family caregivers, detail treatment programmes and suggests simple practical ways of coping with daily stresses, such as moving and transferring patients with stroke.

This timely book recognises that the elderly are a unique group of 'patients'; because of their physiological and chronological positions, they may face special 'problems' (not all of them pathological), which are nonetheless very real and trying, both for the family physician and also for their caregivers. It offers a new and practical perspective for caregivers who have had difficulty understanding their elderly wards and yet find little comfort attributing the myriad of problems faced by them to "simple old age". In the climate of escalating health care costs, and the move towards more holistic medical care, readers who are faced with the particular problems dealt with in these books will find them very informative, and useful in their practical life.

By Dr S G Goh