transmitting a hereditary condition seek information about their risk and explore its implications with a trained professional. However, this apparently simple procedure in fact involves complex cultural processes, because information about genetic risk is itself shaped by scientific discourse and is neither transmitted nor received in a cultural vacuum. Cultural assumptions, of which the participants may be unconscious or only partially aware, can significantly influence the counselling process, sometimes by assisting and sometimes by hampering it. This book, the outcome of a conference which gathered together health professionals, psychologists, social anthropologists, and sociologists, is an exploratory investigation of the role of cultural factors in genetic counselling.

Clinical investigation of biological inheritance necessarily entails knowledge of systems of categorising and defining relatives and understandings of conception and modes of inheritance. Traditionally the preserve of social anthropologists, it is a clinician, Bernadette Modell, who, in the first chapter, sets out a model of kinship patterns in different populations and discusses its implications for understandings of the causality of genetic disease, management of illness, and genetic counselling. Chapters by Aamir Darr, a medical sociologist, and Nadeem Qureshi, a general practitioner, then draw out some possible implications of marriage within the family for the genetic counselling of British Pakistanis.

In Britain, the question of cultural difference most frequently arises when clinicians are of white, middle class backgrounds and their clients are from "ethnic minorities"; the existence of cultural difference is implicitly linked to the classification of groups on the basis of either biological or cultural features or some combination of the two. Helen Macbeth's chapter usefully dismantles the idea of the ethnic (or, indeed, racial) group as a genetically discrete entity, showing that gene frequencies are clinal, and underlines the fact that biological factors are dependent variables because human reproduction occurs within a social context. Similarly, Ursula Sharma's chapter emphasises that although ethnic groups are frequently defined (by the media, race relations, service providers, and ethnic group activists, etc) in terms of an inherent or "fixed" culture, such reifications do not withstand empirical scrutiny.

Assuming that a Muslim woman will never consider termination of pregnancy, or assuming, like four of the five Asian GPs interviewed in Josephine Green and Merry France-Dawson's study of women's experience of antenatal screening in the West Midlands, that women of African descent can cope without medical intervention may have serious clinical implications. Gulshan Karbani, Susie Godsell, and Robert Mueller argue that stereotypical images of white, Asian, or black people, images which black or Asian people may themselves share, may reflect unconscious "fantasies" about "black" or "primitive" cultures and "white" or "civilised" ones which inhibit realistic thinking in the counselling process.

To focus on one particular cultural feature in the context of genetic counselling, particularly if it represents a value or practice very different from one's own, can blind us to other factors. For example, Sue Proctor and Iain Smith argue in their discussion of birth outcome among Bradford Pakistanis that the focus on consanguineous marriage as the "cause" of congenital defects may inhibit scientific understanding of the other socioeconomic factors involved in influencing birth outcome. It is vital to increase awareness of cultural difference, but too much can be made of it as well as too little. As Marilyn Strathern argues in her critique of the concept of culture, the part played by culture in relation to other socioeconomic factors cannot be assumed but must be established through empirical research.

It is not just the relation to "others", particularly "ethnic" groups, that cultural differences can affect the counselling process, but in relation to people from one's "own" culture. Drawing on ethnographic data collected in south Wales, Charlie Davison explains how "lay" understandings of inheritance may mean that clients give the results of genetic tests more meaning than clinicians intend. Martin Richards's discussion of how "lay" models of understandings of inheritance are linked to ideas about kinship and of how these understandings vary for different genetic conditions raises issues at the heart of the genetic counselling process. Even for clinical geneticists themselves, a "lay" model of inheritance may have more power than a scientific model outside the clinical situation or when the clinician is also a client.

A book such as this inevitably risks becoming a series of loosely connected essays and Angus Clarke's introduction makes no grand claims to an integrated perspective on cultural factors in genetics. Even so, the first three sections of this book could be described as explorations of the uses and abuses of culture in genetic counselling. The chapters mostly deal with British situations, but the volume includes two papers from Africa. Tefrof Jenkins and Jennifer Kromberg, both professors of genetics in South Africa, give a preliminary account of changing perceptions of genetic disorder among black South Africans, and Olu Ajayanju, a professor of medicine in Lagos, tells a riveting story of introducing counselling for sickle cell disease in Nigeria.

The fourth section of the book considers some of the social and political issues raised by recent advances in genetics, issues which include fears of genetic discrimination and fears that genetic knowledge will be used to account for behaviour which has social as well as genetic causes. These chapters are important in promoting awareness of the wider context in which genetic counselling takes place and also point to the need for research into the range of public understandings of scientific knowledge. The volume will be of interest to clinicians and also to students and lecturers in both the social and medical sciences, including those who are exploring the links between the culture of science and the science of culture.

ALISON SHAW


Dr Seisa and his colleagues have organised a series of excellent meetings focusing on various aspects of nephrology during the past few years, and each paper and poster presented has been published subsequently in the beautifully produced Contributions to Nephrology series. Together they form an excellent library. The most recent volume relates to a meeting held in Autumn 1996 which included sections on polycystic kidney disease, tuberous sclerosis (TS), von Hippel-Lindau disease (VHL), Alport's syndrome, primary hyperoxaluria, cystinuria, and Anderson-Fabry disease. The speakers and authors of the papers are all acknowledged experts in their various fields, with a predominance of nephrologists, so that the clinical aspects are particularly well covered. The paper by Torres on the renal manifestations of TS is particularly useful as it emphasises the frequency and importance of clinically significant and sometimes life threatening renal complications, something which a geneticist may not fully appreciate. A practical approach to screening is included. The surgical management of renal carcinomas in patients with VHL was the subject of much debate in the meeting and this is reflected in the papers. Dr Neumann and his colleagues in Freiburg adopt a very conservative approach with nephron sparing surgery so as to postpone the need for dialysis for as long as possible. They may wait until tumours are 5 cm or even 7 cm in diameter, while other centres would operate on tumours of 3 cm diameter. It is possible that the range of VHL mutations found in the German population is associated with less aggressive renal carcinomas than those found elsewhere. I would recommend this slim volume for geneticists with an interest in hereditary kidney diseases who would appreciate well written and referenced, up to date papers on the specific conditions included.

FRANCES PILINTER
Hereditary Kidney Diseases

Frances Flinter

doi: 10.1136/jmg.35.5.440

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://jmg.bmj.com/content/35/5/440.citation

**Email alerting service**

Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article. Sign up in the box at the top right corner of the online article.

**Notes**

To request permissions go to:
http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions

To order reprints go to:
http://journals.bmj.com/cgi/reprintform

To subscribe to BMJ go to:
http://group.bmj.com/subscribe/