which respond to treatment, screening procedures were rapidly brought into use on both economic and humane grounds. As they were safe, painless, intelligible to most persons, and claimed to help eliminate an illness within the personal experience of most adults the technique spread rapidly. Since cancers must also start somewhere, similar attempts were made to detect presymptomatic signs, an attempt partly based on the obsolete concept that the lymphatics carried the lethal cells in leisured cohorts beyond reach of the knife. The veins are now known to offer quicker travel. This procedure was particularly attractive in the breast which was palpable, and the cervix which could be scraped. Both procedures became widely recommended, and liberally financed, without any clear evaluation of the relative risks and costs of removing what was healthy as opposed to not removing an organ which would show suggestive signs of cancer if examined.

The Slow and steady extension of medical curiosity from that minority, first defined by the rich and ill, and then by the ill, to the whole population, has changed the basis of medical responsibility, since the doctor goes to the patient, and, in consequence, must be even more careful to do more good than harm. In order to explore some of these problems a series of essays was written under the chairmanship of Professor McKeown, with the sponsorship of the Nuffield Provincial Hospitals Trust, both to discuss the general problem and to evaluate some of the screening procedures in use.

Of the 10 disorders, or groups of disorders, currently exposed to enforced scrutiny only 4 are said, on the dust jacket, to be based on valid evidence. One of these appears to be phenylketonuria, though the lucid article by Dr. J. M. G. Wilson shows the weakness of even this evidence. For human geneticists this disorder is of prime interest, not because of its physical impact, for it is rare and only partially curable by a diet whose unpalatability is itself a threat to normal development, but because, in the excitement of finding a potentially curable disorder which could only be diagnosed by chemical methods, it led to such enthusiasms—mainly among physicians interested in novel therapeutic advances and geneticists inexperienced in medicine but exasperated by the ignorance and complacency they found there in relation to genetics—that vast projects were imposed with a rapidity appropriate to an epidemic disease and without clear costing or open discussion. (In some American states emergency legislation was introduced.)

By diverting midwives from midwifery and hospital biochemists from hospital biochemistry a vast network is being extended to catch some 50 children a year in Britain who may or may not need a diet they may or may not get. This diversion may or may not be justified, but the decision has been taken, and it will be difficult to stop a steady growth in demand for more and more blood for detection of rarer and rarer diseases unless medical geneticists take an active and informed part in the orderly and harmless allocation of resources.

In this disorder, and in some other disorders which contain a subgroup of mendelian conditions, such as deafness, or show intense familial concentrations which are doubtless in part genetic, such as diabetes and glaucoma, or which are due to genetically determined antipathies, as in rhesus sensitization, the authors have attempted to evaluate the humane and economic consequences of investigating those who do not, or cannot, complain. No one who has read the book, or its introduction by Lord Cohen, will discard it as a mere numerical exercise by those ignorant of clinical medicine. The remarkable point is that a book of this nature should not have been written earlier, and that, for 20 years, neither the Medical Research Council nor the National Health Service should have noticed the vast and fertile no man’s land lying between their more obvious responsibilities.

The book cannot be recommended too highly. It is appropriate that Lord Nuffield, who was introduced to medicine by the erratic performance of Osler’s car, and who explored the inspection of apparently working parts in the motor industry in order to provide a guaranteed product by economic methods, should have endowed the organization responsible for one of the first discussions of the orderly and beneficial deployment of inspection procedures to man.

J. H. Edwards

Shorter Notices


Not the least of the services of the History of Ideas Club at Johns Hopkins was the publication in 1959 of a series of outstanding historical and philosophical essays brought together on the centenary of the Origin of Species. This welcome paperback edition—the third reprint of the collection—carries a valuable bibliographical note by Richard Macksey on the literature from 1959 to 1967.


This little book on genetic counselling is one of the series of authoritative Heidelberg Pocket Monographs. It is intended for the general practitioner and covers adequately the elementary human genetics necessary in such an exposition. The empirical aspect of much of the advice that can be given is stressed, as are the avoidable difficulties. The text is lucid and is greatly helped by well-constructed Tables.