Book reviews

Gerontechnology: Growing Old in a Technological Society
Edited by Gari Lesnoff-Caravaglia

Images of a confused elderly lady trying to use her remote control to make a telephone call was my first reaction on receiving this book.

In fact, this socio-medical perspective offers a fascinating insight into ageing—with or without a disease burden—in a technological society. It is edited by a social scientist and has equal contributions from physicians and scientists. The line-up is entirely American but the text is applicable universally. Some novel concepts are explored which will broaden the mind of the practising clinician. For example, the concept that childhood is characterised by expansion of your personal world and ageing by shrinkage gave me a new insight into my day job. You will not learn 20 new causes for a confused patient but you will learn how technology could potentially assist in their management.

One definition of ‘New Technology’ is technology that doesn’t work yet! The authors explore the contribution of technology to maximise function and participation in the elderly and it is obvious from the dearth of references that many of the benefits are still in the incubator. It is to their credit that the authors are careful not to over-interpret descriptions of pilot projects in areas such as ‘smart homes’. The emphasis throughout is on the use of a considerable range of technological aids and devices, as compared to pharmacology, in the management of disease and disability in the elderly. Special mention should go to the chapters on ‘Ergonomic design for older adults’ and ‘Robotics and independence for the elderly’.

As usual, there is a clutch of errors which don’t detract from the overall enjoyment of reading the book e.g. Part III and Part IV have been transposed somewhere in the print process.

To quote Mark Twain ‘Seventy is old enough, after that there is too much risk.’ This book will assist anyone working with the elderly, including non-clinicians and people managing or working in care homes, to understand how technology can help reduce the risk.

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. . . and a Time to Die. How American Hospitals Shape the End of Life
By Sharon R Kaufman

Sharon Kaufman is professor of medical anthropology at the Institute of Health and Aging, University of California. The core of her book is a set of detailed observations of decision making in relation to the dying processes of 27 patients in local hospitals. She also observes a unit, average length of stay 5 years, for 60 people who are chronically comatose or respirator dependent (there are 45 similar units in California). She reports close analysis of actions of patients, family and clinicians, between 1997 and 2000.

Much of the discourse is unfamiliar to people working in the UK. The idea of ‘Brain Death’ is hardly mentioned. Doctors place the responsibility for making decisions about approaches to management onto families rather than taking decisions themselves with family involvement. In one case, a family appears to overrule a patient who asks for cessation of treatment, with the doctors’ collusion. ‘Do not resuscitate’ decisions are usually made at the very end of life. Her conclusion is that ‘the hospital system organises and constrains our choice-making’. How people die is a manifestation of ‘the insidious power of bureaucratic imperatives.’ Nature is socially and culturally constructed so ‘it can no longer provide the moral foundation for the good or correct life.’ ‘In hospital what is natural is negotiable,’ so the idea that death is a natural and inevitable event is not present in most of her vignettes.

This is an important book for those with a special interest in the dying process, but not for the general reader in the UK.

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Oxford Handbook of Geriatric Medicine
By I K Bowker, J D Price and S C Smith

The Oxford handbook series has provided accessible reference information for junior doctors and clinical students...