

**The Carer's Handbook:
How to be successful carer and look after yourself too**

Louise Neild Gilmore

Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1995, 194pp., \$17.95 (paperback)

'The carer's handbook' is designed specifically for the use of informal carers in Australia, although there is no reason why the main content of this excellent book should not be useful to carers in any Western culture. The problems and burdens which plague the lives of many informal carers may have serious consequences, with the potential to jeopardise their physical and mental health as well as disrupt the everyday lives of these people. Changing political and social conditions and the impossibility of estimating even the material costs of informal care have left carers vulnerable to exploitation; they are too often regarded as 'cost-free' service providers in the health care system. Gilmore recognises these flaws and she encourages carers to exercise assertiveness and self-reliance to enable them to cope successfully with their caring role. This book does not burden carers with a litany of injustices; it does instead suggest practical and sensible methods for 'operating within the system' while maintaining self-assurance and dignity in both carer and care-receiver.

The book is logically organised, with chapters dealing with general issues, such as the nature of the caring role and the status and rights of informal carers in Australia. Later chapters are concerned with conflict resolution, relationships, communication, emotions, burden and stress management and the institutionalisation of the care-receiver. Some specific situations are explored in detail; for example caring for HIV/AIDS sufferers, children who have serious or life-threatening illnesses, and coping with the death of the care-receiver. Finally, Gilmore provides a list of resources available to carers in each State and Territory as well as information about the local Carers' Associations. There is an adequate index which is supplemented by comprehensive chapter sub-headings, providing ready access to specific information.

In common with most authors of manuals for carers, Gilmore was initially prompted to approach the task by her own experiences as an informal carer. She does not, however, make the mistake of dwelling on personal experiences or those of other carers. What examples she does use are cited briefly and are skilfully incorporated into the text without at any time dominating it. The reader is left with the encouraging impression that Gilmore has acquired, through her own and others' experience, a broad understanding of many carer issues, recognises their importance and attempts to provide information and advice which is always appropriate. The topics covered in the text are of general concern, but the reader is directed to suitable local sources for further assistance.

The author is refreshingly honest in acknowledging that many carer-patient relationships are far from ideal; caring is not always carried out as a result of or within an affirming relationship. She also does not neglect the difficult (and often ignored) topics of sexuality and changing sexual needs and capabilities within the caring relationship. Throughout the book Gilmore stresses the fact that conflict, anger, grief, frustration and depression are perfectly normal and acceptable reactions, and can often be successfully dealt with without the intervention of professionals. Indeed this emphasis on self-help by means of conflict resolution and meditation techniques is one of the most attractive features of the book. The carer is encouraged to retain control of the situation rather than become overwhelmed by problems, but on the other hand, is shown how to recognise the more serious symptoms of stress which indicate the time to seek professional help. Coping with the emotional needs of the care-receiver and helping someone overcome fear and depression is also a difficult task, and Gilmore devotes

considerable space to this issue. There is sensible advice on dealing effectively with medical staff and family members who frequently can inadvertently cause stress to carers who are placed in emotionally vulnerable situations.

The specific chapters on HIV/AIDS, children and death are both sensible and sensitive. The stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, and the failure of many to recognise the legitimacy of the relationships which are often associated with these cases present special difficulties for these carers. Gilmore stresses the importance of honesty, particularly in the case of children, who are rarely deceived by adults' attempts to conceal information. Again, the importance of relationships is paramount; evasion of truth generally has the effect of fostering mistrust, and in the special and intimate caring situation, trust is of supreme importance. Ex-carers too are not neglected; there is information on how to cope when the carer's life focus shifts or is removed entirely on the death of the care-receiver (this is not always recognised as a serious problem, but in fact removal of a primary role can be devastating and difficult to overcome if life-skills have been lost). The institutionalisation of the care-receiver also can be difficult, and Gilmore prepares the carer for a continuing (albeit changed) role in this situation. Making the decision to admit a person to an institution can be traumatic for all concerned, and once again Gilmore's suggestions are useful. Another situation which is rarely addressed

but is not overlooked in this manual is that of the temporary carer, where the care-receiver is expected to recover and return to an independent life.

The irritating use of gender-specific pronouns (although the author explains her reasons for this) is the only detraction from the high quality of this publication. The employment of gender-neutral terms is always preferable in a work of this nature.

The overall impression is that this handbook has been written by a person who is extremely perceptive and has learned much from her own experiences. She has been successful in conveying a great deal of useful and instructive information without at any time appearing pedantic. The tone is always positive, acknowledging that the health and well-being of the carer is crucial, and must not be compromised at any time. This manual is thoroughly recommended. It is essential reading for all carers; prospective, novice and experienced. It is moderately priced, readable and the information it contains is accessible. 'The carer's handbook' is one of the most useful and practical books currently available to informal carers in Australia, and should be readily available to all carers.

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Health in Australia: Sociological concepts and issues

Carol Grbich

Prentice Hall Australia, Sydney, 1996, 318pp, \$35.95 (paperback)

This edited book of thirteen chapters provides a refreshing look at topics relevant to health sociology. The editor set out to provide a text useful for teaching health sociology. Its topics are based on a survey of the content of related courses around Australia.

The book has three major sections. The first deals with conceptual frameworks and an evaluation of theoretical positions in relation to health, including structuralist, interpretive, feminist and postmodern positions. This range of theories is discussed through much of the book. The juxtaposition of biomedical and sociological approaches is described as one of the focuses of the text, and is particularly evident in the chapter on the social origins of illness, where the influence of social process in medicine is emphasised. A theme which emerges and is repeated through much of the book is that of evaluating social discourse as part of the social construction of illness.

The second section presents a number of different health experiences (for example aborigines, gender, migrants, the aged, and social class). These chapters provide an overview of a broad range of sociological concepts and perspectives. While they give information on health differences for specific population groups and demonstrate inequities in the health system, they do not present material in the form of tables and data to the extent of some other health texts (e.g. Davis & George, 1993). What the authors do is focus on issues such as the social construction of health issues, and the social processes involved in ill-health. In addition, they deal with issues that are relevant for service providers and carers. An interesting approach is the use of occupational health and safety as a vehicle specifically to show some of the causes of health differences for migrants, and between social class groups.

Perhaps the most interesting inclusion in the text is the third section, which focuses on health delivery. Here issues relevant to the politics of health and health care are emphasised. Medical dominance is dealt with, with fruitful discussions of Friedson, Willis, and major critics of medical structure and practice. The inclusion of a chapter on consumers and health consumer organisations contributes a very constructive discussion about conflicting ideas and values of the structure and delivery of health services. It is a highly relevant

chapter in a text which has set out to address problems in the relationship between biomedical and sociological models, and demonstrates in practice some of the conflicting perspectives. A further chapter is devoted to emotion work, and has a particularly useful discussion of its relevance to the work of health professionals. A broad approach to conceptions of the body in health care concludes the book. Issues in the delivery of health care provides a broader than usual coverage of health topics to the text.

There are many insightful comments about a broad range of health care and health service issues. One of the main features of the book, however, is that it is user friendly. It is easy to read for teachers, students, and practitioners. There are good case studies on topics relevant for today, and there are quite thorough lists of tutorial questions throughout the book. Another useful feature is the inclusion of a glossary of terms for each chapter, and a composite list of terms at the end of the book.

The book would be a valuable adjunct to health sociology courses. It provides theory and data on a sufficiently diverse range of health areas, with some very useful theoretical discussions and themes emerging (for example the social construction of health, and the characteristics and importance of medical and social discourse in analysing health situations).

For academics, the text provides a diversity of topics and some innovative approaches to health issues. For students it is a collection of a broad range of theoretical approaches, and clearly describes some of the bases of inequity in our health system. For practitioners it provides a balance of interesting and refreshing ideas, together with data for some of the major health groups in Australia. The text shows the need to adopt new approaches to understanding health issues, and to ways of presenting problems in order to address many of the current health debates in Australian society.

Reference

- Davis, A., & George, G. (1993). *States of health: Health and illness in Australia*, Sydney, Harper Educational.

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Psychiatric Ethics

Sidney Bloch and Paul Chodoff (Eds.) 2nd Edition.

New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp 556. rrp \$72.50 (paperback)

‘(T)he need for the psychiatrist to make vital moral decisions is pervasive, infiltrating almost every facet of his work. And his task is made more complicated by the fact that most of the ethical problems he faces have not hitherto been adequately dealt with’ (Bloch & Chodoff, 1994, p2).

So write the editors in the introduction of this wide-ranging second edition of a book dealing with a topic that hasn’t been seen as relevant by most clinicians until comparatively recently. And, as the editors say, many will still see no need for such a specialty as psychiatric ethics, let alone even medical ethics. There is a belief by many that it is simply a matter of applying universal ethics to your professional practise. That, somehow, all conscientious clinicians will know the ethical thing to do. As the writers point out, there are several issues unique to psychiatry (and, I would add, to other health professions), especially in regard to the responsibility of assessing and treating other people’s minds.

And this isn’t limited to other places, or eras, (although this book does have chapters dealing with Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, as well as modern Japan) nor even the Chelmsfords, but also with the everyday issues, sometimes quite subtle, that have to do with how one relates to one’s patient/client and colleagues. It has to do with the fact that when anyone has higher status, or power than another there is the possibility of that position being abused. It has to do with steering a course within waters that aren’t always as clearly charted as those outside of the field would like to believe.

This is quite an extensive book, with distinguished contributors from different disciplines, as well as working psychiatrists: David Musto provides a useful, if basic historical overview; R.M. Hare discusses how absolutist and utilitarian philosophical approaches could come together, in a chapter which shows his appreciation of how it is not always an easy matter to do good; David

Mechanic considers sociocultural contexts, and the various overlapping roles a psychiatrist is often called upon to play, sometimes resulting in considerable conflict.

In fact, virtually all issues have been considered, including chapters dealing with confidentiality, sexuality, suicide, different types of therapy, disease concepts, professionalism, involuntary treatment, research, deinstitutionalisation, different age groups, (although adolescence deserves a chapter of its own) and a useful discussion of the teaching of ethics, which argues for metaethics and teaching applicable to the learner’s current work experience. There is also an interesting, and useful, appendix of the various medical codes of ethics.

Although passing reference is made to other professions in the field, this is largely a book by psychiatrists, and sometimes this shows. It is clearly written from a medical world-view. There seems little acknowledgment that other professionals in the field can frequently face quite similar dilemmas. There is also at times a confusion between legal and ethical issues by some writers.

Having said this, I found the book a comprehensive, and often stimulating read; quite easily digested, and covering a wide variety of issues involving the treatment of psychiatric disorders. It shouldn’t be left to psychiatrists alone; any thoughtful, conscientious clinician really would find it a worthwhile addition to their library. It would be a useful introductory text for students from any related course. As the field of helping other human beings in our pluralistic society becomes increasingly more complicated, we need more omnibus books of this quality, dealing with the whole gamut of ethical issues in a single volume.

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Enquiries to Brigid McCoppin (03) 9418 6944 or
Michael McGartland (03) 9479 1750.