

**Book Review**

**Modern Medical Mistakes**

By C.M. Godfrey  
A book that talks about the mistakes made by medicine can be fascinating. But when it is realized that at this moment we may be awaiting the devastating effects that will come from medicines we have taken for granted for years, it becomes terrifying.

In his book *Modern Medical Mistakes* (Fitzhenry and Whiteside; 212 pages; \$10.95) Dr. Edward C. Lambert points out in clear language that, although medicine has made many advances, these advances have been accompanied by avoidable physician-produced diseases.

And Lambert is not writing about quackery, or about the mistakes made by doctors. He is writing of mistakes in concepts of disease mechanism, side-effects of drugs and overdosing.

**MEDICAL THEORIES**

If you were alive during the first 20 years of the twentieth century, your highly trained, scientific doctor most likely would have told you your bad health was due to self-poisoning — auto-intoxication.

This theory, which was accepted by eminent doctors, said that disease was the result of absorption of toxins due to putrefaction of the intestinal contents. Cure? Surgical removal or short-circuiting of part of the intestines. It wasn't until World War I that this error in concept was corrected.

Or focal infection. This meant that your diseased tonsils, adenoids, teeth, appendix, ovaries or prostate were removed to correct a host of diseases. As late as 1953, teeth and tonsils were removed in the treatment of arthritis.

If organs were removed in order to cure the patient, others were given x-radiation — particularly infants in whom the thymus was blamed for crib death. After an x-ray examination showed the thymus seemed to be slightly enlarged, it was radiated with x-rays. By 1950 cases of cancer of the thyroid gland, as a result of the radiation, were seen. They continue to be discovered.

**TODAY'S TECHNIQUES**  
But Lambert does not stay with historical problems; he also concerns himself with current techniques. Operations for improving the supply of blood to the heart and brain have intrigued surgeons since the mid-1930s.

In 1965, tying off the internal mammary arteries in order to improve blood supply to the heart was fashionable. It took several years before careful experimentation showed the operation was ineffective.

A similar type of operation was proposed for patients with mental retardation and cerebral palsy, to improve brain circulation. After many hundreds of this procedure had been carried out, in 1968 the operation was abandoned.

The story of medicine's mistakes is not confined to the surgical field. Lambert shows clearly how thousands of patients were not helped by medication such as elixir of sulfonamide. This "miracle drug" of the 1930s was dissolved in diethylene glycol. Out of 358 persons who were poisoned, 107 died.

Contaminated yellow-fever vaccine and polio vaccine led to many fatalities. Reducing pills, synthetic hormones, cholesterol-reducing agents, headache powders, diarrhea remedies — all have been indicated as a cause of disease rather than a cure.

**MORE MISTAKES**  
Thalidomide, a recent memory, was only one of a series of drug disasters that resulted from lack of adequate testing before being released freely. (A German chemical company claimed that thalidomide was completely innocuous and the best drug to be administered to pregnant and nursing mothers.)

But medical mistakes are not all a matter of history. They are still with us, according to Dr. Lambert.

Enteroviolform, used commonly by tourists to avoid diarrhea, has caused severe neurological disturbances in the Japanese. (Strangely, it seems to be limited to Japan.) Phenacetin, a common headache tablet ingredient until recently, causes kidney damage. And the administration of stilbestrol to pregnant mothers may result in the development of vaginal cancer in their daughters 10 to 20 years later.

Lambert admits that progress in medicine will be accompanied by unhappy side effects. However, he argues that premature release for general use of various forms of treatment before they have been adequately tested, and excessive use of remedies that are often non-essential or ineffective, are two unnecessary causes of medical mistakes.

Dr. Charles Godfrey is professor of rehabilitation medicine at the University of Toronto.

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