Medicine and the Media

DURING THE first two weeks of January, BBC 2 showed a series of ten programmes about parents in difficulty with their small children. Unlike most television programmes, When the Bough Breaks has not been put together as a speculative exercise: the producers state three aims: to show troubled parents that they are not alone in their problems; to increase their understanding of why they have difficulties with their children; and to encourage them not to “bottle up” the problem but to seek outside help.

The first six programmes dealt with individuals describing problems experienced with their children; and later programmes showed various professional and self-help ways of dealing with those problems. Individual descriptions were linked by a cosy commentary from John Thaw and edited comments from a general practitioner—Graham Curtis-Jenkins—and a social worker with special skill in child abuse—Joan Court—as well as other professionals.

Many of us whose professional lives have been concerned with children should be delighted to see the mass media contradict the ubiquitous rose-coloured view of child rearing. That this was a worthy attempt to do so is certain; it was a pity, however, that many of the episodes produced few teaching points and lacked any dramatic impact. I tried the experiment of ignoring the screen and listening to sound only (not difficult with the outdated and faulty video equipment in the BBC’s viewing room). Nothing seemed to be lost, which suggests that the programme makers had failed to take advantage of the enormous impact the screen can make.

The producers have been careful not to be obtrusive and not to show violence happening in a family. Their ethics cannot be faulted, but pictures of a chaotic young family in the evening might have led more readily to viewers identifying their own problems. Similarly, physical violence need not be shown, but it would not have been difficult to pick up the casual verbal violence that goes on in most families and to illustrate this as an early link in the chain that leads to a murderous assault. More telling than the recollections of parents was the opening graphic sequence of a harassed mother surrounded by ironing, a crying baby in a high chair, and a toddler.

As usual some of the “experts” were light years away from their potential clients in language, dress, and manner, but others—particularly the worker from Chiswick Family Rescue—provided a lesson in communication. Advice was given to consult a general practitioner, a health visitor, or a social worker. It is optimistic to suggest that if you seek help you will find it; desperate parents have frequently told me nobody was sensitive enough to interpret their history or symptoms as a covert expression of potential child abuse. The programmes are backed up by a poster campaign and a leaflet detailing where help can be obtained: it says, “Your family doctor will also listen to your problems and suggest ways of dealing with them.” Let’s hope so.

—Harvey Marcovitch, formerly consultant paediatrician, Devon.

Paul Vaughan, narrator of the Horizon programme “A Whole New Medicine” (BBC 2, 12 January) has the kind of voice we should all like to have. Oozing integrity, its business-like gravity out—doctors the medical profession by miles: such a voice is a great asset to a television programme, for it can lend authority to the most outrageous nonsense.

The writer and producer of “A Whole New Medicine” was Tony Edwards, and its subject was “holistic medicine”—apparently the USA’s latest blanket term for fringe medicine, covering moxibustion, optometry, faith-healing, transcendental meditation, and many more. What the BMJ a year ago called the flight from science Edwards hailed as a “new era in medicine.” “The beginnings of a revolution in health care,” said the announcer, setting the scene for another exhibition of that garden-fence naiveté that too often characterises the BBC’s medical programmes. “The quack has always been a figure of vicious caricature,” intoned Vaughan accusingly, and Edwards looked at quackery as a charlatan looks at Old Moore’s Almanack: they all say it’s rubbish but . . . you never know.

The script used the “but . . .” method of exciting sympathy for these medical undogmas. “Acupuncture was once called complete quackery, but . . .” “The medical profession just laughed at wheat-grass therapy, but . . .” “Orthodox science would say therapeutic touching is downright rubbish, but . . .” The effect of this rhetoric came partly from the phrasing and partly from the accompanying pictures: a blood test for food allergy which Noddy in Toyland would regard as unsophisticated (mix whole blood with a bit of food and see what happens) was illustrated by brilliant photography and followed by a film star saying it had cured his rheumatoid arthritis. “Conventional haematologists think this is rubbish, but . . .” here was James Coburn telling us how much better he felt.

“Conventional” doctors never appeared, but none the less all of them were frequently castigated as unanimous mockers, mindlessly dismissing anything unorthodox. Despite its alleged inadequacy, conventional science was reverently invoked when its findings happened to favour fringe medicine. The tone of Edwards’s programme was less scientific than religious: he seemed to reflect a yearning for doctors to become more priestlike, and rely more on mysticism and the placebo effect. It made an interesting change from the usual media criticism that doctors are too God-like.

It is difficult to tell whether an audience left over from Barry Manilow and “The Hitch-hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy” would be a sceptical or a gullible one. I hope it didn’t contain many sufferers from multiple sclerosis, cancer, or thyroid nodules, since these diseases, as well as the expected psychosomatic disorders, were shown being “cured” by visual imagery or the laying on of hands. British doctors seriously interested in diet or acupuncture must have been embarrassed by this exercise in credulity: does Horizon really want medicine to step back a century or two? If so, they will have to persuade us with more objective programmes than this one, which—despite Vaughan’s voice—was on the same intellectual level as the darts match which followed it.

—James Owen Drife, lecturer in obstetrics and gynaecology, Bristol.

Correction

We regret that an error occurred in the piece by Bernard Knight (29 November, p 1485). The last sentence of the second paragraph should have read: “A patient being sterilised by tubal cautery developed gross postoperative troubles which for a long time were thought to be paralytic ileus, whereas in fact she had become obstructed because of necrosis of all but four feet of her small intestine, which had to be resected.”