

cause of idiopathic learning disability. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **172**, 180–183.

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### Slow progress in improving practice of electroconvulsive therapy

**Sir:** The recent article by Duffett & Lelliott (1998), concerning electroconvulsive therapy, highlighted the poor progress made in improving some areas of practice in this field, despite two previously well-publicised

audits and recommendations made by the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

It was heartening that only 7% of respondents identified the anaesthetic service as “poor”, and that there were occasional problems in only 15% of cases. The standards of anaesthetic practice are governed by recommendations published regularly by the Association of Anaesthetists and have been discussed in the anaesthetic press (Dunkley, 1995; Watts, 1996).

Regular audit in the form of Confidential Enquiry into Perioperative Deaths reports has resulted in a fall in the number of anaesthetic-related deaths due to continuous change in practices. The low morbidity and mortality associated with electroconvulsive therapy (Pearman *et al*,

1990) may explain the lack of incentive to change practice shown by some institutions and the slow impact made by the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

**Duffett, R. & Lelliott, P. (1998)** Auditing electroconvulsive therapy. The third cycle. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **172**, 401–405.

**Dunkley, C. J. A. (1995)** Anaesthetic assistance during electroconvulsive therapy. *Anaesthesia*, **50**, 1009.

**Pearman, T., Loper, M. & Trieryl, L. (1990)** Should psychiatrists administer anaesthesia for ECT? *American Journal of Psychiatry*, **147**, 1553–1556.

**Watts, J. (1996)** Anaesthetic assistance during electroconvulsive therapy. *Anaesthesia*, **51**, 609.

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## One hundred years ago

### The Mental Affections of Children – Idiocy, Imbecility, and Insanity

By William W. Ireland, MD Edin. London: J. & A. Churchill. Edinburgh: James Thin. 1898. Pp. 435. Price 14s.

Dr. Ireland's former work on Idiocy and Imbecility was in its time the best English work on the subject and the present treatise will be welcomed by all interested in the subject. Some chapters are reintroduced with necessary modifications from the older work, but a great part is entirely new. Dr. Ireland commences with a general discussion of the causation of idiocy, in which he gives the chief place to neurotic heredity, considering alcoholism a less important factor *per se* than is generally held. He strongly combats the view that idiocy is to be looked on as an example of reversion to a lower type in the evolutionary scale. Dr. Ireland makes the following classification based on pathological grounds: (1) Genetous idiots, including the well-known “Mongolian” group; (2) microcephalic; (3) hydrocephalic; (4) eclamptic; (5) epileptic; (6) paralytic; (7) traumatic; (8) inflammatory; (9) sclerotic (10) syphilitic; (11) cretins; and (12) idiots by deprivation.

This classification is convenient, notwithstanding that from the point of view of symptoms the groups are much less definite. The fullest descriptions are of the genetous idiots and of the microcephalic. The general peculiarities of feature and of physical and mental development are very clearly given, although Dr. Ireland has been rather sparing in illustrating his descriptions from photographs of his cases. Individual and striking cases are described in detail, and there are some useful though rather brief accounts of the conditions of the nervous system found after death. Medical treatment in these cases calls for little remark, and Dr. Ireland has no belief in surgery for relieving the mental condition. Craniectomy, he believes – and we agree with him – to be useless for the relief of microcephaly, the operative procedure being “founded on an incorrect pathology”. The chapter on Cretinism is a little disappointing. There is an admirable chapter on a subject which usually is passed over – Insanity in Children and Insane Idiots. The sensory deficiencies of idiots are described, but no mention is made of the excessive development of the powers of smell which has been recorded by others. The mental limitations of idiots and the

best methods of educating them are described and a short account is given of the laws bearing on the subject. The book concludes with an interesting chapter on “Wolf Boys” – boys who are found wild and are supposed to have been fostered by wild animals. When serving in the army in India Dr. Ireland had opportunities of inquiring almost at first hand into several supposed instances. He believes that some were imposters but that most were idiots who had been exposed by their parents in the woods. He quotes some delightful stories of boys, reminding one of Kipling's Jungle Book hero Mowgli, but it is clear that Dr. Ireland is sceptical as to the truth of most of them.

Dr. Ireland is so well known as an interesting writer that expectation as to the quality of the book was pitched high and was not disappointed. It is the best account we have of an extremely difficult subject and is worthy of the great reputation and long experience of the author.

### REFERENCE

*Lancet*, July 1898, 265.

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