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[Book Review of] *A Handbook for the Study of Suicide*, edited by Seymour Perlin

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A Handbook for the Study of Suicide

Seymour Perlin, editor

Oxford University Press, 200 Madison Ave., N. Y. 10016. 1975, XII + 236 p., \$9.95 (\$5.95 paper).

This comprehensive and useful book was developed for a post-graduate program in Suicidology at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. Apart from one or two turgidly technical contributions, most of it is very readable, and should be valuable to anyone in direct working contact with those sufferers whose lonely individual despair emerges as a rising suicide rate.

Historian George Rosen reminds us that although the Bible does not condemn suicide, in the first century, after the 'idealized' Masada suicides, Jewish leaders differentiated between justified religious suicide and fanatical martyrdom. Since the sensitive, creative people are more suicide prone than those less creative, a society with few creative people could not afford martyrs en masse. From the Christian Church's declaration of suicide as a crime, the author traces changing attitudes through recognition of depression as a malady, Montaigne's bleak discovery that man is the only creature capable of self-hate, and the collecting of suicidal data, by which some of these contributors have gotten sidetracked from the vital truth of self-hate.

The brilliant essay by A. Alvarez is adapted from *The Savage God*. No one writes so well of the

young 'romantic agony' of Chatterton, Keats, Shelley, Byron and Coleridge, who died to prove that 'life is death and death the only life worth having.'

The style of philosopher Brandt suffers by comparison. Buried among phrases like "maximise utility to mold the conceptual and motivational structure of persons," he has some reasonable arguments on the rights and wrongs of suicide. But how much point is there in debating judgments against someone for an act which by its nature removes him from judgment? Relaxing his prose, the professor finishes with an acknowledgment of the right to choose death, and even the moral obligation of the physician to assist.

Jean LaFontaine and Ronald Maris, in their respective fields, tend to dehumanize Anthropology and Sociology by their concentration on social factors in suicide, with only a brush-off nod to varying psychological makeup, and a belated admission that the crisis of individual despair has an awkward way of not fitting into the studied social jigsaw.

Dr. Solomon Snyder gives an excellent exposition of the biological mechanics of suicidal depression and of the MAO inhibitor and tricyclic anti-depressant drugs. Immensely useful for both

the physician who prescribes and the patient who ingests, and a crystal example of how to make technology readable.

George Vlasak deals handily with the complexity of suicidal behavior and dares the taboo truth of the 'social worthiness scale,' indicated by the loudness and length of the ambulance siren and attitudes of Emergency Room staff. Bodies of suicides (unless famous), sharing the bottom of the scale with skid-row alcoholics, are subject to experimental indignities by doctors, and refusal of handling by nurses.

Seymour Perlin's contribution on Psychiatry explains reasons for suicide (the helpless rage) engendered by inability to change the world, or adapt oneself, the

revenge motif, the despair of guilt and failure), and shows how the isolation common to all these makes help-seeking less likely.

Dr. Sainsbury describes varying modes of such help, and how all suicide prevention agencies, lay and professional, could be integrated to save lives.

Mary Monk, on statistics, points out the difficulties of evaluating such suicide prevention services, since one cannot justify withholding the services from a selected or random group.

All in all, this handbook, from a group of concerned and informed people, is a welcome addition to the literature of suicide.

Monica Dickens
Director, The Samaritans

REVIEWERS

Recent additions to LQ's staff of book reviewers include the following:

Dickens, Monica, British novelist and journalist; Director, The Samaritans, International Suicide Prevention Organization.

Doherty, Dennis J., Ph.D., Assoc. Prof. of Theology, Marquette University.

Jefferson, Mildred F., M.D., President, National Right-to-Life Committee.

McGregor, James E., Asst. Prof. of Philosophy, Boston State College.

Southgate, M. Therese, M.D., Deputy Editor, *The Journal of the American Medical Assoc.*

Books Received

Abortion in Perspective: The Rose Place or the Fiery Dragon? (with 18 slides and audiocassette). Dr. Donald DeMarch. Hiltz & Hayes Pub., Cincinnati. 1974, XIV + 194 p., \$3.95

America's Worst Drug Problem: Alcohol. Richard L. Reilly, D.O. Liguori Pub., Liguori, Mo. 1974, 128 p., \$1.75

Bibliography of Bioethics, Vol. I. LeRoy Walters, Ph.D., editor. Gale Research Co., Detroit. 1975, XXIII + 225 p., \$24.00

Biomedical Ethics: Morality for the New Medicine. Kenneth Vaux. Harper & Row, Pub., New York. 1974, XVIII + 134 p., \$5.95

Biomedical Experimentation on Prisoners: Review of Practices and Problems and Proposal of a New Regulatory Approach. Albert R. Jonsen, et al. School of Medicine, Univ. of Calif. 1975, 43 p., no price given.

Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness. Barbara Ehrenreich & Deirdre English. The