Diet and heart disease: a round table of facts. By Margaret Ashwell. British Nutrition Foundation, London, 1993. 64pp. £13.50.

The British Nutrition Foundation has produced something of a ‘curate’s egg’. It is to be congratulated on producing a booklet which addresses some of the wider aspects of how nutritional change might bring about decreased coronary risk, and which does not simply focus on effects mediated through cholesterol and blood pressure. Much of the discussion about different nutrients and their influence on physiological variables and pathological processes is good and well presented. The reviewer does, however, wonder for whom the book is intended. At one point we are told that ‘The heart is a muscular pump which contracts regularly to keep blood flowing through the body’s extensive network of blood vessels’. Clearly, one might think, a book intended for readers without even an elementary knowledge of biology. Laymen know perfectly well what the heart is, but the term lipid, which is not defined in the book, causes great confusion. Elsewhere in the book it is necessary to be familiar with biochemistry and physiology at quite an advanced level.

The book is quirky in its choice of references. The Framingham study is correctly described as a long-term prospective study, but the authors illustrate and refer only to the six year follow-up data. This produces confusing illustrations in which the overwhelming effect of increasing cholesterol seems to be to decrease deaths. This effect disappears in the longer term follow-up. Having drawn attention to the association between low cholesterol and the increased mortality which is particularly evident in shorter studies, readers are left without explanation or reference to where to find one. In the part of the book relating to pathology one has the feeling that the authors are uneasy with what the atheromatous plaque actually is. The impression is given that atheroma consists only of fibrous plaques and that these develop directly from fatty streaks. There is no mention of cholesterol-rich plaques whose rupture, with subsequent thrombosis at their torn surfaces, often leads directly to myocardial infarction.

The diet to prevent coronary disease is similar to that proposed in the report of the Committee on the Medical Aspects of Food Policy and I am pleased that the British Nutrition Foundation endorses that remarkably sane document. The balance in the discussion on the contribution of various dietary components is also right. What is disappointing is that in a book entitled Diet and heart disease there is no discussion of any high risk strategy. The recommendations are for the population as a whole. Should there not be a more rigorous approach to diet for people with established coronary heart disease, hyperlipidaemia, diabetes, morbid obesity or hypertension? After all, many of the potential readers of this book will be dieticians and practice nurses dealing with patients with just these conditions. Presumably the book was not intended simply for experts planning nutrition policy for the public at large.

Although I cannot recommend this book as a comprehensive or balanced account for any single group of health professionals, it does have flashes of inspiration and clarity. It could certainly be read alongside other books and sources of information by medical students and by many doctors trying to brush up their knowledge of the nutritional aspects of preventive cardiology. Nutrition students and dieticians will find it valuable as, I am sure, will practice nurses and other health workers involved in preventive medicine. I should like to see it read by those responsible for teaching cookery and running canteens and restaurants, but I suspect that its full potential will not be realised because of its unfocused and uneven approach.

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Aviation medicine. Edited by Richard M Harding and F John Mills. BMJ Publishing Group, London, 1993. 218pp. £13.95.

The first edition of this moderately sized paperback appeared in 1983 as an assemblage of articles written by two RAF medical officers and published in the BMJ. Ten years later, its structure remains virtually unchanged, but its size has doubled—a rate of growth that roughly matches that of the population of travellers by air.

Aviation medicine was born of military necessity but its importance to the civil sector soon became apparent and even dominant. The health, the safety and the comfort of passengers (and of those who fly them) are paramount and, in a book intended for doctors at large, the authors have given much of their attention to the problems that confront the medical departments of airlines. The special physiological hazards faced by aviators in the armed forces—loss of consciousness during exposure to centrifugal acceleration, and decompression sickness at high altitude, for example—are not ignored, and a final long chapter is allotted to manned spaceflight. The treatment of such arcane matters is neither exhaustive nor exhausting, and ample references are cited for those who wish to delve more deeply.

True medical emergencies are no more common in flight than in other modes of transport, and a brief account of them is padded out with lists of the contents of first aid and emergency packs carried by British Airways. It is supplemented by a discussion of the legal implications of giving medical attention to passengers; this eschews the oft-quoted plight of a