BOOK REVIEWS

FORENSICS

Law and Mental Health: International Perspectives, Volume I. Edited by David N. Weisstub. New York: Pergamon Press, 237 pp., $45.00, 1984.

This is the first volume of a series dedicated to the exploration, at an international level, of mental health issues and the development of relevant mental health legislation. Like any other volume edited by David N. Weisstub, this one excels by the qualifications of the contributors, and by the thoroughness, depthness and overall quality of their contributions. This quality remains throughout all of the chapters.

Volume I of the series pertains mostly to issues on mental health and the law in the United States of America. This should not discourage Canadian forensic psychiatrists. Apart from the scholastic need to know about legislation in that country, Canadian forensic psychiatrists will find the volume of great help to understand similar emergent legislation patterns in Canada on matters of criminal responsibility and informed consent.

On the other hand, the more technical, medically oriented chapters, such as the ones on sexual aggression and forensic assessments, are state of the art compilations and reviews of delicate subjects which make the everyday practise of forensic psychiatry in any country. These chapters also therefore, offer a tremendous amount of information to forensic psychiatrists in Canada.

The book has six chapters. The first one by Professor George Dix is a treatise in itself on the issue of criminal responsibility and mental impairment in American criminal law. Professor Dix uses the Hinkley case as the landmark to present an erudite study of criminal responsibility issues and psychiatric defenses pre- and post-Hinkley.

The following chapter on informed consent has some reference to Canadian and English developments on this area of the law, but this is only a bonus, for this chapter contains a thorough review of the origins and development of the controversy that has raged over the past twenty-five years between the paternalistic group that espouses "health" as being the predominant issue in the doctor-patient relationship, and the group that considers "autonomy" as being the predominant value in that relationship. The author presents as a solution an "integrationist" approach which, those involved in the controversy, should pay close attention to.

The chapters on sexual aggression, forensic assessment, and assessment of responsibility in criminal law and psychiatric practise, are almost how-to-do chapters, clearly written and to the point. These three chapters offer the balance between the practical needs of the forensic psychiatrist and his interest in scholarly issues.

Finally, the chapter on Jury selection should be an eye opener for forensic psychiatrists who, usually, are not too closely involved in this kind of interaction between behavioural sciences and the law.

The six chapters in this book are presented in double columns, the paper is of high quality, and the book is free of typographical errors. Forensic psychiatrists in Canada will do well acquiring this book; it is an excellent buy.

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Hunting Humans: The Rise of the Modern Multiple Murderer, by Elliott Leyton. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 318 pp., $17.00, 1986.

Yet another book about multiple murderers. The topic is morbidly fascinating and descriptive studies abound. The special interest of this particular essay lies in the perspective of its author, a sociologist skilled in anthropological field studies. In this instance he has abandoned field work in favour of an analysis of the massive amount of case histories and background data already accumulated, and he has produced an excellent book.

After an introduction to establish the constraints of this approach, the book is divided into three parts. In the first part, biographies are presented of four notorious serial killers of recent history. The serial murderer spreads his killings over a period of time, in contradistinction to the mass murderer who kills in one explosive outburst. The careers of Edmund Kemper, Ted Bundy, Albert DeSalvo the Boston Strangler, and David Berkowitz the Son of Sam are reviewed in sparse and factual prose that makes riveting reading. The blushes of the psychiatrists involved in the different investigations are not spared. It seems that the confessions of Albert DeSalvo were initially ignored because he did not fit the psychiatric profile that had been compiled, but for me the lasting image of the book was that, during an interview in which Edmund Kemper was cleared by psychiatrists as representing no danger to himself or to society, the head of one of his victims lay in the trunk of his car just outside.

In terms of social class, we are told that serial murderers are surprisingly fastidious and consistent in their choice of victim. The mass murderer is less discriminating but still directs his attack at a particular social stratum. This is the message of the second section of the book which details the explosive killing sprees of two such mass murderers, Mark Essex and Charles Starkweather.

The murderers themselves, no matter how intelligent and apparently sane, can articulate no understandable explanation for their crimes. It would depend on the reader's perspective whether he is satisfied to believe that they are acting out a special mission of compulsive protest at their exclusion from social status. It surely begs a number of questions that are not answered in the third part of the book — an overview of the whole subject. Here the author disappoints with generalities. Since Gilles de Rais in 15th century France, there has been an exponential increase in the number of multiple murderers, at least, of those caught, but so has there been in the general population and the figures are not adjusted. During this increase there has been