Essential Drug Information: The Story of a Workshop, edited by David Finer and Göran Tomson, Department of International Health Care Research (IHCAR), Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, 1992. 208 pp., SEK:750. (To be ordered from: Kommmentus Specialdistribution AB, Fabergestagatan 21, S-163 53 Stockholm, Sweden.)

The cover of this publication shows a medicine in tablet form in which two people can be seen exchanging information. A drug is only a medicine if it is used in a wholesome way. A woman seldom murders in a rage, she often commits the killing when the man is asleep. The authors show that it is necessary to get judges to understand that such a woman nevertheless may be in despair because she may have well-grounded suspicion that her life is in imminent danger and thus should be judged in a way similar to a desperate male killer. There is much valuable advice on how to assess the battered woman syndrome and thus to give women fair legal treatment.

Assessment of child abuse and neglect as well as incautious measures still, unnecessary repetitions are few. The book appears to be efficient in treatment planning and evaluation of treatment outcomes.

Every chapter has extensive references. Especially important are the references to the works using scales already discussed. The authors point out that many of the described scales are still poorly investigated regarding reliability and validity, and that many require more testing in population studies. It implies that they must be used with caution, and that many assessments must be made in each case. There are still extensive amounts of research to be done in these fields.

Especially thought-provoking are the chapters on psychological abuse. The mere definition of such an act or a behaviour as maltreatment and oppression calls for another approach than if it is defined as part of a family relations problem. The consequences is that most patients with all kinds of emotional problems should in some way be investigated with possible maltreatment in mind. This fact gives rise to the natural fear of jeopardizing the rapport with the family. These pertinent questions are only briefly mentioned. My impression is that the authors in this book try only to make statements about what is scientifically grounded. This is both a strength and a weakness, since between the lines it minimizes a lot of important knowledge of a softer kind, probably of great interest to readers. There are not many case illustrations, but those given are very illustrative and helpful in increasing the understanding of points stated.

The different chapters are written by authors who are very experienced in their fields. Most of them come from the U.S., some from Canada and one from the U.K. All of the authors seem to share a common view of the field, resulting in different areas being treated approximately in the same way. It is still, unnecessary repetitions are few. The book appears to be somewhat ethnocentric because areas outside the U.S. are hardly mentioned. I still would strongly recommend it to readers from non-English speaking countries. Although practices may differ a great deal within the U.S., the discussion is mostly made in a manner easily transferred to the reader's own situation. There are also different cultural norms regarding violence, but authors convincingly show that common basic human needs still exist regardless of cultural differences.

The fact that the book is dominated by American studies may not only be due to the fact that Americans seldom read other languages but also to a true difference in clinical practice. It strengthened my interest in variations in clinical practices within and between countries. Maybe the American medical system, where doctors are easily sued for malpractice, has made Americans more keenly aware of the need for developing good assessment procedures.

Reading this book has been a challenging task. As with all really good books it creates more questions than it answers. It has certainly made me aware of the fact that it is worthwhile to follow the frontiers of such research because it may stimulate many improvements in clinical practice. I strongly recommend it to all multidisciplinary teams working in these fields.

Department of Child and Youth Psychiatry
University of Lund
Sweden

Gunilla M. Thernlund
disciplines on several aspects of drug abuse and drug information, reports on discussions and activities at the workshop, an overview of eight research proposals designed during the workshop, an account on drug information in Thailand, a useful list of references on drugs and drug information, and—printed on coloured paper—the "Jomtien Consensus on Essential Drug Information." In this last document the participants call on governments, health workers, universities, mass media, the pharmaceutical industry and international organizations to do their part to enhance essential drug information.

This somewhat unusual book rightly calls attention to an urgent tissue. An essential drugs policy does not end when the correct drugs are on the shelves. Its success lies in the healthy use of essential drugs and information constitutes a crucial link to rational use of drugs. It is no guarantee, however. On this point, the organizers and participants at the workshop seem a bit too optimistic. Information on 'rational use' may prove lame and ineffective as people harbour other ideas and concerns and follow their information and rationality. That side of the problem had deserved more attention at the workshop and in the book.

The usual paradox of a detailed conference report is that it is least interesting for the people for whom it was made in the first place: those who did not attend. I am afraid that the heart and most precious part of this book, the lively rapportage of the workshop's discussion, shares that lot. It retains its gist only for those who took part in the debates.

Finally, it is somewhat disappointing that the research proposals in eight different countries hardly reflect the main inspiration of the workshop: to investigate "...what would be essential information about drugs to various users and how to best communicate the message" [p. 12]. Most proposals focus on prescribers as if they are 'users' of drugs. This subtle 'non-compliance' by the participants, who preferred to follow their own interests instead of taking in the message of the workshop, demonstrates painfully that information does not equal practice.

University of Amsterdam - Sjaak van der Geest
The Netherlands