the development of primary healthcare, this book does not address a critical issue in whole-systems healthcare delivery, which is that of the integration of services across health economies. Parts of this book are located in a tradition of publications which seek to describe the particular, perhaps unique, features of primary healthcare, and which does not acknowledge the generalisability of much of what happens in primary care and general practice to patient care in other settings. There is little here about the integration of patient care across the primary/secondary care interface or of integration of hospital-based and community-based care and the development of integrated care pathways. Perhaps this will be the subject of another book.

ROGER JONES
Wolfson Professor of General Practice
King’s College London

Reference

The clinician’s guide to surviving IT

Handing this book to a general practitioner (GP) colleague, just to see her reaction, met with an immediate exclamation: ‘Oh, no! Please don’t make me read it!’ Such a response was not wholly unexpected and as such is the underlying premise of The clinician’s guide to surviving IT. This book is ‘for clinicians, especially those who are nervous or just plain angry about the information technology that is being introduced into the NHS’. Aimed not only at doctors, but also students, nurses and midwives, Professor Gillies attempts to ‘dispel ignorance and suspicion’ about the inevitable march of information technology (IT) into routine clinical practice with the slow but steady implementation of the National Programme for IT.

The book introduces the benefits to patients and clinicians of using IT to support various aspects of care, be that, for example, in sharing or searching information, finding evidence of best practice, or prescribing or monitoring care remotely. Throughout, an emphasis is placed on the necessary changes in practice and responsibilities clinicians will have to take to enable progress. As the author writes, ‘there is no such thing as a free lunch’, emphasising that health informatics is not (just) about computers; ways of working must adapt to realise benefits, and the NHS should not be considered a single organism when prescribing change.

But beneath Professor Gillies’ explanation of how informatics can facilitate joined-up care, there is a lack of integration from chapter to chapter, leaving one wondering exactly who is the ideal target audience? Several chapters serve as a ‘crash course’ in IT applications, while others get bogged down in unnecessary pages of cut and pasted policy documents (almost as page fillers in some cases). Both have their place, but not necessarily between the covers of one small book. It is hard to imagine the reader who requires assistance using Google and PowerPoint, but is also interested in reading a full specification of an informatics National Occupational Standard.

The format of the book needs revision as the reader will find it difficult to ignore the unremitting photos of a mime artist, included ‘to supply you with tips, warnings, things to think about and things to make you smile’. As a means of breaking up the text they work almost too well. Whether you find them amusing, informative or simply patronising will depend on the individual. In a similar vein, but more thought provoking, are ‘intellectual zombie warnings’ which take an informatics ‘myth’ and explain why it is just that. With their underlying evidence base, these really do serve to dispel ignorance and suspicion.

The foreword emphasises that many examples are taken from primary care, and this book is certainly written largely from that perspective. This is not restrictive in subject areas such as national IT policy and consent, but in others where benefits and risks are explored, and in the specific areas of record keeping and data standards, there is little more than a cursory nod to the hospital environment.

The challenges in implementing IT and changing practice are quite different in primary and secondary care. The author presents a well argued vision of the benefits that informatics can bring to the service, but those working in hospitals will struggle to reconcile this with their experiences on the ground where benefits to the individual clinician are far less tangible. There is so much work to be done with the standards of paper records, in understanding what information is collected and why, and in appreciating the roles of myriad non-clinical staff who are involved in the flow of information through the system, yet these issues are not addressed in this text.

The most comprehensive chapters come towards the end of the book. Although not specifically IT issues, the sections on information governance, data protection, freedom of information and consent are essential reading for everyone working with health information (ie everyone). The data protection section, although again written from a primary care perspective, is particularly thought provoking when issues of sharing information across organisational boundaries are discussed.

Within The clinician’s guide to surviving IT there is something for everyone – while far from definitive, there is certainly enough here to present the technophobe with an overview of informatics in the NHS. The reaction of my GP colleague to the book was surprising. She is a clinician who, in her everyday practice, prescribes electronically and documents patient encounters electronically but, without enthusiasm, is obliged to use Choose and Book. It is this homogeneity of informatics practice across primary care which has enabled such a book to be written. There is a huge gulf to bridge before we reach that point in secondary care.

GILES P CROFT and JOHN G WILLIAMS
Centre for Health Information, Research and evaluation (CHIRAL)
University of Wales Swansea

Clinical trials: a practical guide to design, analysis and reporting

Randomised controlled trials are the lynchpin of clinical research. Knowledge about how trials are designed and analysed is an
essential prerequisite to any form of career in medicine. Yet the introduction of extensive regulations for their conduct in recent years and the fact that improvements in therapy are often relatively small has meant that conducting a trial is now often a lengthy and complex business. Many of the key texts on randomised controlled trials were written some years ago and although aspects of these books remain valid, some areas are inevitably out of date and more recent developments are rarely covered. Thus, any new book that aims to give a ‘practical guide to the design, analysis and reporting’ of trials is to be welcomed.

The book is split into five main sections: The fundamentals of trial design; Alternative trial designs; Basics of statistical analysis; Special trial issues in data analysis; and Reporting of trials. Each section is made up of a series of relatively short chapters covering a range of topics. The chapters are generally pitched at a basic level so are ideal for those who are new to the field as well as those who want a quick refresher course; each chapter is accompanied by references, which allow those who are interested to find out more. The layout of the book is pleasing – each chapter starts with a short summary which allows the reader to make a decision about whether the chapter is suitable for his/her needs. The information contained in the chapters is informative and helpfully displayed; tables, shaded in blue, are easy to spot. I was particularly pleased to see chapters devoted to the presentation of research findings, the preparation of reports for publication, multiple testing and missing data, as these areas are often poorly covered.

I did, however, have a number of criticisms about the book. As each chapter is written by different authors, there is often substantial overlap between chapters and, in some cases, the information provided may be contradictory. While some overlap may be useful, particularly if key topics are developed when they subsequently appear, this was often not the case. This will not worry readers who wish to simply dip in and out of the book, reading each chapter as a stand-alone article, but those of us who prefer to read a book from cover to cover may find this irritating. For example, non-inferiority trials are discussed in chapters 12, 13 and 14. There is substantial overlap between the chapters on Covariate adjustment and Confounding, as well as between those on Significance tests and Confidence intervals, Multiplicity and Interim monitoring – indeed, Fig 1 in the latter seems to be the same as Fig 1 in the Multiplicity chapter although the values are, rather confusingly, different. Where similar topics are presented in different chapters, the ordering may at times seem illogical and different notation may be used. For example, in chapter 21, it is assumed that the reader is familiar with regression models, yet these have not yet been introduced. When they are discussed at a later point (chapter 27), the notation is different to that used previously. There are sometimes key omissions (eg there is no mention of continuity corrections or tests for trend in the chapter on Chi-squared tests) and statements may be misleading. For example, the statement ‘the median is often used with survival data’ (chapter 17), whilst strictly correct, is misleading as the authors do not caveat this by saying that this should be estimated using the Kaplan–Meier method in order to give an unbiased estimate. Finally, the glossary was short and the indexing could be improved – my attempts to find some fairly basic terms mentioned in the book (eg censoring, Weibull models, null hypothesis, alternative hypothesis) failed.

Despite these criticisms, I did find the book on the whole useful and informative and would hope that in subsequent editions, better editing could resolve many of these issues. At £30 for 480 pages, it represents good value for money. As with all books that aim to cover a wide range of topics, reading the book will not make you an expert in any particular area. Those who wish to analyse anything but the most basic trial would be advised to refer to a more detailed statistical text. However, for someone who requires a fairly broad introduction to clinical trials, or who wishes to find their way around the medical literature, this book is ideal.

CAROLINE A SABIN
Professor of Medical Statistics and Epidemiology
Royal Free and University College Medical School, London

620 Clinical Medicine Vol 6 No 6 November/December 2006