Are Health Psychologists Physicians?

Harold Geist
Migraine: Psychological, Psychiatric and Physiological Aspects
Malabar, FL: Krieger, 1983. 113 pp. $11.50

Review by
Ian E. Wickramasekera

Harold Geist is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Berkeley, California. His books include Emotional Aspects of Heart Disease. Ian E. Wickramasekera is professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Eastern Virginia Medical School. He is editor of Biofeedback, Behavior Therapy and Hypnosis.

I could not find in Migraine an explicit statement of the author's goals or of the audience for which the book is intended. The goal appears to be to provide both a psychological and a physiochemical understanding of the etiology, therapy, and prevention of migraine headaches, and the intended audience seems to be health psychologists. Why would a psychologist write a book on a medical, and specifically a neurological, topic? The answer, briefly, is that currently the most efficacious and safe therapy for the prevention of chronic migraine is essentially behavioral and psychophysiological. As I pointed out in Biofeedback, Behavior Therapy and Hypnosis (Nelson-Hall, 1976), recent applications of these psychological technologies have provided psychologists with viable alternatives to drugs and surgery in the management of several chronic stress-related physical diseases.

This book is only one symptom of the behavioral medicine revolution, which has been called the third revolution in health care. (The first was the use of sterile procedures in surgery, and the second was the discovery of antibiotics.) As scientists and professionals we need to ponder the implications of this revolution. In particular, we need to consider how it will affect (a) the legal definition of a physician, to determine whether we psychologists are practicing as physicians if we now treat physical problems (migraine headaches) with psychological techniques, (b) malpractice insurance rates for health psychologists, (c) the components of medical education required for future health psychologists, and (d) the incomes of MDs, if in the future most patients with functional headaches and stress disorders prefer to see health psychologists.

Out of an uneasy technological flirtation between behavioral psychology and clinical medicine was born behavioral medicine/health psychology. This child threatens to revolutionize the understanding of the etiology, diagnosis, and prevention of a wide variety of chronic stress-related physical diseases, only one of which is migraine. How adequately can a psychologist write or review a book on such a medical topic? The answer is that the first generation of health psychologists like Geist and myself, because we were highly vulnerable, were strongly motivated to do our medical homework.

Geist's book is a brief and scholarly description of the history of migraine, the clinical features of various types of migraines, and the relationship of migraines to a variety of other psychosomatic disorders. The book reviews both the genetics and the physiochemical basis of migraine and lists a variety of applicable medical and psychological therapies. There is also a speculative and intellectually provocative section on migraine as a form of "autonomic epilepsy."

Although this book provides an excellent update on the history, etiology, diagnosis, therapy, and prevention of migraine, it lacks a critical evaluation of the various physical and psychological theories and therapies of the disorder. It lists multiple studies, but it includes little evaluation of the methodology of the studies and the adequacy of suitable controls. Appropriately trained health psychologists using a variety of methods derived from the technologies of behavior therapy, biofeedback, and hypnosis can now prevent most functional headaches effectively and confidently.