

## Mothers, Young People and Chronic Illness

Clare Williams  
Burlington: Ashgate, 2002

### Reviewed by Brydon Gombay

*Mothers, Young People and Chronic Illness* reads too much like the doctoral dissertation on which it is based. Few concessions have been made to non-academic readers, although parents of adolescents with diabetes or asthma will find much of interest here, as will health care professionals who recognize the need to respect the coping mechanisms of young diabetics, asthmatics, and their mothers.

For this study, author Clare Williams interviewed people between the ages of 15 and 18, 20 with diabetes and 20 with asthma (ten males and ten females in each group), as well as their mothers. In one case she interviewed a father who was responsible for the care of his daughter. Williams's conclusions cast light on the ways in which chronic health conditions during adolescence are gendered and how health affects gender development. In addition, she shows how the socialization of mothers of diabetics and asthmatics reinforce the stereotypical expectations of motherhood which continue to pervade our culture.

Adolescence is a time when peer approval is of primary importance to all young people, yet mothers continue to be blamed for non-compliance with medical regimens on the part of their children. Mothers also are blamed for "mollycoddling" their sons (there is an undertone here of homophobia on the part of health care professionals), and "nagging" their daughters (who feel constrained by their mothers' care). Ironically, encouraged to promote adolescent independence, mothers are blamed whenever illness erupts in the lives of their sons or daughters.

Boys tend to hide their condition and ignore the extent to which their mothers play the role of "alert assistant," enabling them to take part in the sports culture which is so important to their developing identities. Girls, however, soon take charge of their medical regimens and thereby spare their mothers that responsibility. Boys, who usually disregard their mothers' invisible interventions, often overestimate the extent to which they take responsibility for themselves. Although diet issues which form part of the diabetic regimen often lead to eating disorders, girls usually adapt by sharing their experiences and seeking help from friends.

Chronic illness, with the medical visits and treatments it entails, diminishes a mother's career options, except in the case of middle-class mothers who may enjoy flexible working conditions. Williams does not explain how single mothers deal with a child's chronic illness, although she describes the experi-

ences of four fathers (out of the 40 parents) who share in their children's care. Interestingly, she shows how health care professionals reinforce gender expectations by emphasizing mother and daughter competence in managing chronic illness.

## **Parenting Your Parents: Support Strategies for Meeting the Challenges of Aging in the Family**

Bart Mindszenty and Michael Gordon  
Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2002

### **Reviewed by Sheila Martel**

The realistic vignettes included in *Parenting Your Parents* describe probable situations and offer resolutions for adult children (an unsatisfactory term) caring for aging parents. Among the family situations presented, many are neither easy nor do they end happily. Chapter three, for example, illustrates the need to carefully consider all ramifications of encouraging elderly parents to relocate.

The book is enhanced by the authors' own stories of caring for elderly parents. A Personal Parenting Planner poses many key questions and a resource guide that follows is excellent. It offers a complete list of resources at both national and provincial levels.

Elderly divorced parents are missing from the family compositions presented. Certainly, our children will be dealing with elderly parents who are divorced, and who might live at great distances from one another. Moreover, differing viewpoints and attitudes toward the very issue of caring for elderly parents requires further discussion. Some adults simply will not accept responsibility for their elderly parents. This is undoubtedly rocky terrain for siblings who disagree over their individual and collective obligations toward their aging/ill parents.

It would seem that reversing the roles—turning grown children into “parents”—is simplistic and unrealistic. Although the authors did not invent this paradigm, it begs reassessment. The authors recognize, for example, that the need to take time off from work can be costly to careers. (The issue of sacrificing career achievement and leisure time in order to care for loved ones is hardly new terrain for mothers, however.) Further, the book does not live up to the promise of its subtitle, *Support Strategies for Meeting the Challenges of Aging in the Family*, since explicit support for caregivers is not provided. Nonetheless, Mindszenty and Gordon have succeeded in creating a reader-friendly primer for parent care. *Parenting Your Parents* is an excellent starting point for those beginning to undertake this important and complicated journey.