BOOK REVIEWS


There are two ways of writing a textbook on a small specialized branch of medicine. The first is to describe the practice of one particular school, its great virtue being that it sets a standard against which others can measure their own work. Ingraham and Matson have already successfully exploited this technique in their Neurosurgery of Infancy and Childhood. The second method is to assemble a team of contributors each of whom speaks of his own subject. Ideally this should lead to increased erudition and brilliance; in practice it tends to sacrifice unity of presentation.

The first few chapters of this book are devoted to a detailed account of various clinical methods. The section on lumbar and ventricular puncture is very full but, rather irritatingly, subdural puncture is dealt with partly here and partly in a later section. There is an interesting account of the use of electromyography; the section on the E.E.G. is so short and so general that it would have been best omitted. The section on anaesthesia lists many possible methods, but gives little practical advice. An interesting innovation is the introduction of a chapter on medical conditions resembling surgical problems, but it is strange to find no mention of Devic's disease here, although the papilloedema seen in this condition may lead to the suspicion of intracranial tumour.

Congenital malformations are dealt with at some length. The advice on the management of spina bifida cystica is clear and sensible but the indications for operation on spina bifida occulta are muddled and the writer has apparently abandoned any effort to classify his results. In the section dealing with encephalocele, there is the barest mention of hydrocephalus, and none of ultimate mental retardation, though both complications are not infrequent.

In the section on inflammatory diseases the term débridement (of wounds) is used as a synonym for excision, which it is not, and the advice that persistent post-infective subdural effusions should be drained into the pleural cavity is controversial, to say the least. It is also a pity that although the writers of other sections devote much space to the technique of well-known surgical procedures, antero-lateral decompression for the relief of paraplegia in spinal tuberculosis is barely mentioned.

The author of the section on vascular malformations of the nervous system sets out a series of case histories separated by relatively brief general remarks. The result is that although given much useful information, a reader not already familiar with the subject is left in doubt which of the clinical observations are of general importance, and which apply only to the case described.

The section on intracranial tumours is long and not wholly satisfactory. Most of the references are old (before 1950) and it is unhelpful to refer simply to 'Bailey' when the bibliography lists two different Baileys with eight references between them. I cannot understand the statement that 'medulloblastomas occur almost exclusively in males and the same is true of craniopharyngiomas' (p. 225). In any event it is inconsistent with the further statements that there is no specific sex predilection in craniopharyngiomas (p. 268) and that medulloblastomas are three times more frequent in males than in females (p. 314). The author's views on the prognosis in medulloblastomas are unduly gloomy and take no account of the work of Ralston Paterson and his colleagues.

The section on peripheral nerve tumours, in which is included neuroblastoma, is sketchy and would have been better omitted.

The sections on trauma to the head and spine are both practical, though it is wrong to use 'hypothermia' as a synonym for control of pyrexia and curious that although 3rd and 6th cranial nerve palsies are mentioned, nothing is said about damage to the 4th cranial nerve, which is as common as any post-traumatic oculomotor disturbance. From time to time the contributors, and even the editors themselves, seem to lose sight of the fact that they are writing about infants and children. There is an editorial note in the section on spinal injuries which refers to intervertebral disc herniations as due to a degenerative process: this is surely not the case in children.

There are separate chapters on the surgery of involuntary movements and leucotomy (lobotomy). The wisdom of this is doubtful. The application of the former to paediatrics is not properly worked out, and many would think that the latter should never be practised at all in children. There is also a chapter on the surgery of epilepsy but it is devoted entirely to advice on local resection of the cortex, and the author starts from the proposition that no surgery should be done for epilepsy below the age of 12. The surgery of infantile hemiplegia, particularly hemispherectomy, is nowhere mentioned.

There is much useful material in this book, but it seems to fall between two stools. The paediatrician will find more surgical detail than he needs, while the trained neurosurgeon will find some chapters insufficiently authoritative. In a second edition there should be ruthless pruning, and the standard of the bibliographies at the end of each chapter should be raised.