Book Reviews

Clinical Pathology in Mental Retardation. By R. D. Eastham and J. Jancar. (Pp. viii + 356; 79 figures. 65s.) Bristol: John Wright. 1968. Modern estimates put the prevalence of mental subnormality at 2–3% of the population. In the majority of cases the cause of the defect cannot be established, but laboratory investigations often help in arriving at a diagnosis. The authors have compiled a comprehensive survey of laboratory findings in disorders which are associated, or may sometimes be associated, with mental retardation. The book contains chapters on disorders of amino acid, lipid, and carbohydrate metabolism, followed by chapters on disorders of the endocrine glands, of connective tissue metabolism, and on chromosomal anomalies. The final section, ‘Other conditions known to cause mental retardation’, deals with additional genetic and environmental factors acting before or after birth, which may directly or indirectly interfere with intellectual development, such as toxic substances, infections, disturbances of mineral metabolism, haematological and immunological disorders, and abnormalities in the metabolism of the purines, pyrimidines, and vitamins. Each disease is described under the headings of clinical findings, mental state, inheritance, laboratory findings, and nature of the lesion. Morbid anatomy, neuropathology, and histopathology, which are normally considered part of clinical pathology, are largely excluded from this survey. Numerous good drawings are an attractive feature of the book. The references listed at the end of each chapter have been carefully selected and are well up to date. Unfortunately no references are given in the text. This makes it difficult to identify the reference from which the data quoted originate.

In this field it is important to distinguish between an association of a disease and mental retardation, which may be due to chance, and a causal relation. Thus, it is likely that in a disorder of such high prevalence as cystinuria the association with mental retardation is one of chance (p. 61). It appears to have been the policy of the authors to include where possible all the findings in any disease which has ever been reported as associated with mental retardation, but this approach has left little scope for a critical evaluation of the data. Also it makes for an uneven balance of the book. Disorders of immunity which ‘may be associated with infections which may lead to brain damage and mental retardation’ are given almost as much prominence as the chromosomal disorders. In well-documented conditions lack of space inevitably leads to oversimplification and ambiguities. For example, in the section on amaurotic family idiocy it is not always made clear whether the findings are valid for all variants or confined to Tay-Sachs’s disease (p. 112). The section on the laboratory findings in Down’s disease is confusing, particularly where it refers to the alleged differences between trisomy and translocation (p. 196). Some errors of fact have slipped in. In contrast to what the reader might infer, most authorities would agree that inheritance of the Duchenne form of muscular dystrophy is almost always sex-linked recessive (p. 281), oxalic acid excretion in the non-ketotic form of hyperglycaemia is normal or allegedly low (p. 69), the polynuerritis caused by thalidomide is not always reversible (p. 238), stained films of CSF unfortunately do not always reveal the infecting organism in bacterial meningitis, nor is it advisable to delay treatment until the sensitivity of the organism has been determined (p. 218), and there is no reliable evidence that penicillin G when taken by the mother causes fetal brain damage (p. 237). Nevertheless the book contains a great deal of valuable if not always reliable information, much of it not readily accessible elsewhere. It is particularly useful for rapid reference to the rarer disorders occasionally associated with mental retardation.

Proceedings of the First Congress of the International Association for the Scientific Study of Mental Deficiency. Montpellier, France, September 12–20, 1967. Edited by B. W. Richards. (Pp. xiv + 982; 175 figures + 155 tables. 150s.; $20.00.) Reigate: Michael Jackson. Distributed by B. W. Richards, Caterham, Surrey. 1968. Many find large international congresses unbearable; they are confusing and invariably present the three most interesting papers simultaneously! However, they do gather together at one time a large collection of papers portraying activities in different countries and highlighting recent developments in the particular subject. It is useful to have all this material on record and available with little delay, and the editor is to be congratulated on achieving the formidable task of presenting 31 symposia and numerous individual papers in a volume of almost 1000 papers within 12 months of the meeting.

This is a volume for the library shelf. There is something about every aspect of mental deficiency: genetic, chromosomal, biochemical, clinical, educational, and social aspects in both the young and the old are discussed. No one topic is covered completely, so the newcomer to this field would be unwise to approach this volume as he would a textbook, but any worker interested in the views being expressed in 1967 would do well to look here.

The quality of the printing and illustrations is good. Though a heavy task for the editor, an index of the main subjects would be helpful and really should be included.
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Prognosis in Child Psychiatry. By HILCHEN SOMMERSCHILD and PETER CHRISTIAN KREYBERG. (Pp. 118; 48 tables. Kr. 90,000; 105s.) Universitets Forlaget, Oslo; Williams & Wilkins, Baltimore. 1968.

This book reports an investigation on the course and outcome of cases admitted between 1950 and 1954 to a department of Child Psychiatry, Rikshospitalet, Oslo. The follow-up covers a period of 11 to 15 years, but because of the relatively small population of Norway and the legal need to report changes of domicile, all but one of the 285 patients were traced even after this lapse of time. This feature, together with the fact that all cases were seen by one of the authors, and received little or no psychiatric treatment, makes this study a unique and extremely valuable account of the natural history of nervous disorder in childhood.

The assessments are inevitably superficial. No projective testing was carried out, and even the attitude of the parents to the child could not be reliably judged. This limited depth shows, for example, in figures suggesting that parents of psychotic children were much more normal than those of neurotics, a suggestion that conflicts with all my experience of studying such families at any depth, and leads one to suppose that the parents' own assessment of themselves was accepted as reliable. Despite this, the findings are of unusual interest and cover among other things the incidence and change with time in the major diagnostic categories, the long-term relevance of somatic factors, including brain damage, and the apparent relevance of family pathology.

At follow-up the improvement in the neurotic group, especially in those who have been diagnosed as suffering from psychosomatic disorder, is particularly striking, as is the lack of change in the psychotics and psychopath. The features related to a more favourable prognosis are interesting and confirm previous indications; they include the capacity to relate to others, the capacity to experience depression and anxiety, and the capacity to play.

The book is compact and well written, the presentation is straightforward, and a clear summary of 10 pages outlines the conclusions succinctly.


This stoutly-produced and durable volume is well fitted to take its place beside the first report of this survey now 5 years old. Using the same data, it extends and completes the information regarding perinatal problems obtainable from the 1958 Survey, though children in the control group are continuing as the National Childbirth Development Study.

The material is presented as a series of studies by different authors, though shared principally by Sir Dugald Baird and Professor A. M. Thomson, who have provided six chapters based on an analysis of material in Aberdeen, and by the editorial team consisting of Professor Neville Butler, Dr. Eva Alberman, and two research assistants, Misses Fadrick and Thomson.

But clearly a number of contributors have given much care, thought, and time, and the whole volume is the result of the co-operative efforts of a large team.

The first two chapters restate the background to the Perinatal Survey and the general problems underlying mortality rates in this period. Thus they provide a basis for those who perhaps may not have access to the first report. Successive chapters then are concerned with high risk prediction at booking, the effects of maternal factors (including smoking), on length of gestation and fetal growth, caesarean section, and multiple birth. Then four chapters concerning stillbirth and neonatal death and their determinants are followed by a chapter on the reduction of perinatal mortality by improving standards of obstetric care. Finally, chapters on congenital malformation and the first follow-up of children complete the text. The last 50 pages comprise appendix tables, glossary, references, and indexes to the first and second report essential to the best use of the two volumes.

Format is clear, tables and figures well set out, and the whole, considering present costs, commendably cheap. All these factors should assist the wide distribution which the volume requires—into each hospital department of obstetrics and paediatrics, into each university department and each Public Health department, wherever the two disciplines of obstetrics and paediatrics are practised and taught, wherever nurses, health visitors or midwives meet, wherever administrative decisions are taken or policies planned.

A health service can only be effective if wise planning and sound clinical judgement can be based upon adequate accurate knowledge; and this applies particularly when we are concerned to prevent death and injury, before and during birth. This report gives the type of data required, for it displays the operation of complex social and biological factors in different proportions throughout our population, and indicates the interaction of social situation, biological fact, and obstetric services in determining perinatal loss.

This interaction is always altering and shifting as the variables change: these data were collected 5 years ago and to that extent reflect a past rather than a present situation. But the need for such work is now firmly established; another survey is planned, and there is no doubt that a permanent mechanism for the collection of data should be established so that informed planning is possible. The Birthday Trust and its Committee and their collaborators have contributed to the tradition of socio-medical survey, and have established their own place in history. But the need for a more permanent mechanism is still present and should be met.