Book Reviews


A bold and successful attempt at a multidisciplinary approach to a difficult subject is reported. Each of the 15 papers written and discussed by 25 experts provides the reader with a vast amount of factual data, sometimes rather indigestible, but derived from a wealth of experimental and, to a lesser extent, clinical experience. Of necessity it is a collection of different styles, not all of which are easily read, but for those interested in any particular topic, it provides an up-to-date review.

The text covers numerous aspects of fetal physiology from the moment of implantation to delivery, though perhaps greater practical impact would have emerged had the discussion been taken through to include the newborn. This, however, was not the purpose of the Symposium. The emphasis is undoubtedly endocrine, though there are several good contributions on the subjects of cardiopulmonary development and function, and two on fetal metabolism and weight gain. The text also includes papers on the maternal unresponsiveness to paternally derived fetal antigens, the fetal reaction to drugs taken by the mother, and on neuromuscular development over the perinatal period. The role of hormones in programming the sexual differentiation of the central nervous system and the ultimate behaviour patterns of the offspring makes disturbing reading, knowing the freedom with which hormones are administered during human pregnancy today. The section on ‘Genetic Assimilation of Environmental Variability in the Organisation of Behavioural Capacities of the Developing Nervous System’ begins, ‘Science tends towards simplistic reductionism . . . ’; and, while undoubtedly erudite, the data are, except perhaps for the very expert, hard to assimilate and the hypothesis at times rather difficult to follow. The leadership is thus likely to be somewhat restricted. Perhaps the most exciting (and ultimately rewarding) is the paper on the initiation of parturition.

The purpose of the Symposium was, as the Chairman’s opening remarks put it, to ‘explore the gaps’ and ‘spot the connexions’ between the numerous disciplines which contribute to our knowledge of fetal growth and development. While the bridges built by this exercise seem small in comparison to the effort involved, this should not deter others from following in the same manner, nor from gaining benefit from study of the material presented. As might well be expected in a report of this kind, there are as many new gaps identified as there are old ones closed. In his closing remarks the Chairman admits that there had been little mention of fetal immunological competence, mineral metabolism, and brain and enzyme development, but the fact that this report runs to over 300 pages and contains 73 illustrations indicates the depth of detail recorded.

It is from reports of interdisciplinary exchanges such as this that birth is given to ideas of substance for future study. This is an up-to-date review for the specialist, it is required reading for the research worker, and at the same time acts as an object lesson in the folly of becoming too isolated in one narrow field of study. Those who seek ideas for further discussion and research will find them in abundance in this book.


The British Medical Bulletin is the closest contact most of us have with the British Council, the body whose job is to make influential foreigners think favourably of us by propaganda and by public and personal relations. To be effective, consistency, reliability and respect for their audience are essential, and these are well reflected in the Bulletin of which the May number deals with immunization (as opposed to immunology).

In no field of medicine are the same virtues more necessary, and the Bulletin reflects the efforts that have been made and some of the difficulty in achieving them. The series of reviews by British (or South African) authors is introduced by the Editor, Professor D. G. Evans, who after a bow to Jenner and a plate of his pock-marked hut, rapidly covers the history of immunization and warns of its known and future hazards, such as the unwitting introduction of fowl leucosis virus with yellow fever vaccine.

Dr. Cockburn of W.H.O. discusses the transient effects of mass programmes in countries where follow-up is poor, the need for mixed vaccines, and the difficulties not only of the control of vaccine quality but even of recognizing epidemics in remote and tropical lands. As sanitation delays exposure to poliomyelitis, so the severity of epidemics increases and vaccination is not yet keeping pace.

Professor Harry Smith of Birmingham describes the chemical basis of vaccine production, and there follow articles on all the individual vaccines, all packed with facts and references, and many displaying the extent of our ignorance as well as the remarkable advances of recent years. Dr. Pollock of the Public Health Laboratory Service discusses the place of γ-globulin, or human normal immuno-globulin as we must now call it, and explains the volte-face of his service on its use in rubella.

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