Book reviews


Few subjects have aroused as much controversy as subclinical lead poisoning. Although overt clinical lead poisoning in childhood continues to occur, in recent years it has been realized that many more children and adults are exposed to subtoxic amounts of lead. The argument has frequently been propounded that any excessive exposure is potentially hazardous and attempts have been made to link such exposures to intellectual impairment and disturbed behaviour. The definition of 'poisoning' in this context is uncertain and there is no general agreement as to whether it should be confined to individuals with symptoms, or extended to those who are asymptomatic but nevertheless have lead-induced disturbances of metabolism. The recent demonstration of impaired enzyme function at blood lead concentrations found in much of the normal population has added a new dimension to the debate.

The publication of this book, which is the result of an unusual but welcome collaboration between British and German authors, is timely. It is essentially a review of the literature concerning the biological aspects of lead. Reference is made to some 2000 publications which have been selected from the literature, including many in European languages other than English, that might otherwise have escaped attention.

The text is not as dull as this might suggest and on the whole is well balanced and written in a pleasing style. It is noteworthy that only one tenth of the book is actually devoted to the subject. The remainder is concerned with the metabolism of lead and the recognition, causation, treatment, and pathology of lead poisoning. To some extent this approach is unavoidable in order to set the subject in perspective but it inevitably reflects the lack of real evidence for the existence of a subclinical problem and weakens the authors' case.

There are some omissions so that the reader is left with the impression that there is a strong relation between lead in cities and the blood lead concentration found in the inhabitants, and similarly that lead is bound to the erythrocyte membrane rather than its contents, whereas in both cases there is evidence to the contrary. The suggestion that food should be labelled with lead content, though laudable, is clearly incapable of universal application. Few would accept that the provision of (presumably lead-free) milk for children has any relevance to the prophylaxis of lead poisoning.

The contentious nature of the material does not detract from the value or interest of the book. This is a subject which deserves more attention from paediatricians who should at least be aware of arguments that are being made on behalf of the children for whom they are responsible. There can be little doubt that this is the forerunner of other 'environmental' debates which will increasingly engage those who are more concerned with community health than with traditional paediatric medicine.


With the publication of the 8th edition of this well-known vade-mecum, paediatricians once again have to be grateful to Dr. Ben Wood. 'Indispensable' is not overfusome praise, so large is the amount of information and so cleverly is it arranged between the unassuming paper covers. A dog-eared copy emerging from the paediatric houseman's coat pocket seems now as inevitable as his bleep. The information is well up-to-date, and this edition accepts (with evidently the same reluctance many of us share) the inescapable 'SI' units.

It would be hard to find fault, but maybe in preparing future editions the editor will have to resist a temptation to include too much. For instance, is the treatment of leukaemia today so standardized that it is appropriate to set it out here? The present vade-mecum is just about the right size and scope—let it stay that way, please!