Book reviews

Mechanisms of Alcohol Damage in Utero. Ciba Foundation Symposium 105. Pp 296: £26.50 hardback. Pitman, 1984.

This book is the report on the Ciba Foundation Symposium held in London in 1983. The contributors include most of the well known names in the field of fetal alcohol research. The first two sections comprise reports on animal based research using mice, rats, chick embryos, murine neuronal cell cultures, and Macaque monkeys. These reports continue to fuel the controversy around the value of pure bred experimental animals in predicting and explaining the effects of prenatal alcohol exposure in man. The discussions highlight these difficulties. They illustrate the major problems experienced by the pure scientist and the clinician alike in translating their findings into clear advice on the critical time of exposure, the dose-response relation, and why some people are affected and others not.

The third section is devoted to papers on the growth and development of exposed rats and children. Dr Spohr is reassuring about the reported improvement in the psychiatric and cognitive progress of affected children over a four year period. The final section is devoted to the excellent work by Dr Wright and co-workers on moderate alcohol consumption and fetal outcome, and to the more important research on prevention.

To this reviewer the most pleasing aspects of the book are the excellent introductory and closing sections which not only set the content into perspective but also emphasise the need for continuing research. The book summarises well the diverse areas of research that are being pursued at present into how and why alcohol damages the fetus. It does not attempt to answer all the major questions on prevention and dose-response relation but illustrates the problems facing both scientist and clinician.

IAN SMITH

Your Child with Eczema. By D J Atherton. Pp 166: £4.95 paperback. William Heinemann, 1984.

This book is intended as a guide for parents of children with eczema. I have, therefore, asked a lay person experienced in child

care (including children with eczema) to read it, and have incorporated her impressions.

After a brief description of the structure and function of normal skin, the book concentrates on a description of atopic eczema, with particular attention to likely aetiological factors. Half the book is devoted to the practical management of children with eczema, including details of topical applications, avoidance of exacerbating factors, and control of infection. The last part deals with complications and associated diseases, and more general advice on topics such as education and psychological problems in the family.

The section on practical management of eczema is likely to be particularly useful to parents, both by amplifying and explaining their medical management, and by discussing the many relevant environmental factors which a parent otherwise learns by trial and error. For example, the instructions on the use of topical preparations and the application of protective bandages are very clear and well illustrated. Not only parents but also community nurses and doctors would learn much from this whole chapter.

Parts of the detailed discussions on aetiology and corticosteroids are less easy to follow; they may not be understood by a parent who seldom reads. The chapter entitled 'Complications' is misleading, since several of these are associated conditions. The subsection on cataracts which recommends yearly ocular examination may be unduly alarming to the parents of the average child with eczema.

The book is optimistic about the outlook for the child with eczema. It will be a very valuable aid to the inquiring parent and to all involved health workers, and it is well indexed. If guided to the more practical sections most other parents would find it a worthwhile investment.

K S SLOPER

Epilepsy. 100 Elementary Principles. (Major Problems in Neurology, vol 12). By R J Porter. Pp 162: £9.95 hardback. W B Saunders, 1984.

This guide to epilepsy is based on a unique format, a series of 100 concise statements which represent the distillate of Dr Porter's extensive knowledge of this subject. The

principles are not elementary in the sense of meaning simple or introductory, but provide the components of a comprehensive and detailed approach to the total care of a patient with a seizure problem. The first half deals with diagnosis both at an aetiological level, and according to seizure pattern. The accurate recognition of the latter is the key to the correct choice of treatment, and the author skillfully reviews, but does not oversimplify, current seizure classification. He focusses on areas notorious for causing confusion, for example the differentiation of absence attacks from complex partial seizures. He also reminds us that at least 20% of those who fail to respond to anticonvulsants do not have epilepsy.

The second half covers the general aims of anticonvulsant treatment, pharmacology, pharmacokinetics, and selected regimens for partial and generalised seizures. Most of the discussion is relevant to paediatricians practising in the United Kingdom. American bias is reflected in the secondary role given to sodium valproate. Although there are brief sections dealing with seizure in early infancy, the main emphasis is on older children and adults.

Clinicians struggling to help children whose lives are blighted by refractory epilepsy will be greatly assisted by studying this slim and relatively inexpensive volume. It will incite them to approach seizure diagnosis with renewed enthusiasm, tempered by heightened discipline.

D I JOHNSTON

Perinatal Epidemiology. Edited by M P Bracken. Pp 550: £40.00 hardback. Oxford University Press, 1984.

This book will be of interest to both neonatal paediatricians and obstetricians. It is a collection of reviews, mainly from the western side of the Atlantic, and is divided into two parts. The first reviews a wide range of paediatric and obstetric topics important in perinatal epidemiology—chromosome abnormality, neural tube disorders, prematurity, low birth weight, perinatal mortality, multiple births, congenital viral infections, and sudden infant death syndrome and spontaneous abortion, induced abortion, infertility.