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Book reviews

Human Prenatal Diagnosis Edited by K Filkins, J F Russo. Pp 424: $90·00 hardback. Marcel Dekker, 1985.

While care of the fetus remains the obstetrician's prerogative, paediatricians, particularly those involved in surgery and neonatal care, often find themselves involved in discussions of considerable complexity concerning prenatal diagnosis and intervention and may find a reference book to be of value.

The 29 authors cover the range of prenatal diganosis from chromosome analysis by amniocentesis and the prenatal diagnosis of spina bifida and inborn errors of metabolism through fetoscopy, ultrasonology, chorion villus biopsy to the technique, new to this reader, of direct visualisation of the embryo, embryoscopy. Sections are devoted to the problems of twin pregnancy, fetal echocardiography, fetal therapy, and legal implications. The rapid developments on molecular biology have resulted in an extensive addendum.

This is very much an American book, as is reflected by its glossy hardback cover and fairly high price and the predominance of authors (23 of the 29) from the United States. This is important because there are differences in the approach to prenatal diagnosis on the two sides of the Atlantic.

I will confess to having taken something of a dislike to the book when I read the first sentence, 'The decision to utilize any of the numerous techniques for prenatal screening tests requires definition of the purpose of such screening.' As usual, the campaign for plain English has not managed to cross the Atlantic. The other criticism is that the rapid pace of prenatal diagnosis means that the book looks a little dated with regard to fetal echocardiology, chorion villus sampling, and the general quality of ultrasonology photographs. On the positive front the book emphasises the importance of accurate genetic counselling, an issue close to the heart of this reviewer, and does provide a fairly comprehensive reference source. The practical illustration is that this reviewer had cause to refer to the book three times during the preparation of the review and found valuable information each time.

In summary, this comprehensive review of prenatal diagnosis is a useful reference source for a field in which paediatricians have an increasing interest.

JOHN BURN

Paediatric Endocrinology—A Clinical Guide. Edited by F Lipshitz. Pp 680: $114·00 hardback. Marcel Dekker, 1985.

This is the third in a series of text books on clinical paediatrics aimed at the general paediatrician and designed to allow him or her to keep up to date and to practise in the various paediatric subspecialities. The authors are American, and the majority are well known paediatric endocrinologists. The format is traditional with major sections on growth and the various endocrine glands, but there are also chapters on the clinical relevance of somatomedin, autoimmune endocrinopathies, gut hormones in childhood, and low renin hypertension. There is a final chapter on endocrine protocols.

The style of writing is often uninspiring, but the scientific content of the book is sound. It is generally up to date, and the references are comprehensive, but this is not sufficient if the book is to be of use to general paediatricians. Unfortunately, like many specialist text books, it has not made allowances for the fact that most of the readers will not have a major interest in endocrinology. In many chapters the authors have covered every eventuality without clear guidelines so that the non-specialist reader may well have difficulty in distinguishing what is essential and important from what is simply interesting or indeed contentious, and this must lead to a barrage of unnecessary tests. This is particularly true in the chapter on short stature, which has four pages on zinc deficiency, when in most children few, if any, investigations are required. Some of the authors have used flow charts or algorithims to point the way to investigation, but these without appropriate comments on the likelihood or necessity of each investigation can lead equally to confusion and unnecessary investigation.

Very few authors discuss day to day management problems, a knowledge of which is essential if paediatricians are to foresee the course of events in individual disorders. This is unfortunately true in an otherwise excellent chapter on congenital adrenal hyperplasia where there is insufficient practical information on treatment during the first year of life, where the problems of monitoring are not sufficiently detailed, and where there is no mention on the way families should handle illness in their child. The well written and authoritative chapters highlight the deficiencies in the remainder; particularly good is that on somatomedin and those on diabetes mellitus and hypoglycaemia and calcium and phosphorus metabolism.

Despite these criticisms I recommend this book to hospital libraries, although I hope that general paediatricians will still refer their more difficult endocrine problems to a paediatric endocrinologist rather than look to this book for detailed guidance.

D C L SAVAGE