Book reviews

Paediatric Problems in General Practice.

The British Paediatric Association should issue this book with a health warning aimed at consultant paediatricians. This book could seriously deprive you of work—not the work that you should be doing but the work of unnecessary referrals to paediatric outpatients by general practitioners.

A general practitioner who has read this book, and indeed a paediatric senior house officer or registrar, would have found a treasure trove of the sort of good solid basic paediatrics that I know I need to practice effectively as a general practitioner. Not having read the first edition I was thrilled to find a paediatric book apparently purged of eponymous conditions and the dreaded glycogen storage diseases. Here was a paediatric text book, although it can hardly be called that, that actually stimulated me and kept me awake rather than put me to sleep.

This is really a book for the majority of doctors in the country who treat children—that is, general practitioners. This is not to be patronising. The book is no less well written and well researched and up to date for that, in fact more so. I think the best description would be that it is a finely tuned book. It is well structured, well bibliographed, and clearly and attractively set out. I particularly enjoyed the widely interspersed illustrative case histories, which in my experience are frequently the hallmark of a good medical read. The layout is problem orientated rather than system orientated and to this extent it matches the children who consult us.

Among the problems that this book addresses are those of ethnic minorities and the authors are not afraid to discuss the doctor’s attitudes as well as his medical knowledge.

Naturally the book covers the controversial areas of sexual abuse and non-accidental injury, although I found that to some extent there was a weakness in the sexual abuse advice in as much as that there was an admirable amount of explanation of how to diagnose sexual abuse but very little guidance on how to deal with disclosure and very little indication of the sort of work that had to be done with the family in the period after diagnosis.

On a more general approach to child psychiatric problems, however, there is an excellent account of how to proceed with a child psychiatric referral and good advice on dealing with divorce and bereavement.

The section on prevention was comprehensive but there seemed to be very little real feel for the use of computers in general practice paediatrics. Perhaps this could be a task for the third edition.

Time after time while reading this book I have tested it against my needs as a clinician meeting problems that my children patients present to me daily—growth, painful joints, recurrent abdominal pain, headache, urinary tract infection, and of course, asthma—all many others that I am sure any other general practitioner can mention. Every time the book scored full marks for common sense, practical suggestions, and up to date management.

In a review all I can do is recommend a book and in this case to general practitioners and training grade paediatricians— I wish I could do more—I wish I could send a copy to everyone of them.

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All paediatricians who look after preterm infants will find items of interest in The Very Immature Infant in which the editors, Andrew Whitelaw and Richard Cooke have compiled a series of short review articles on topics relating to infants less than 28 weeks’ gestation. Whereas many such reviews are published in North America, all the authors in this book are British and they provide a different perspective on many issues and also useful epidemiological and other data relating to this country.

The different authors cover specific areas in which they have contributed to our understanding. These include a useful review on the physiology of the mid trimester fetus by Rodeck and Nicolini; new non-invasive methods of assessing brain oxygenation and haemodynamics is described by Reynolds et al; there is a chapter on the neurophysiological assessment of the immature visual system by Elgey and a particularly helpful chapter on the immature central nervous system by Fielder et al. Many of the articles described the considerable advances in our knowledge and understanding of these very immature infants but our ignorance about other areas is also readily apparent. As the book covers only a number of selected topics several important areas, such as infection and periventricular haemorrhage, have been omitted.

The editors have concentrated on the biology of these very immature infants. There is only an extremely brief chapter examining clinical management (by McIntosh) and a single chapter on birth outcome and costs (by Cooke). The beauty of these articles precludes consideration of difficult but crucial ethical questions surrounding the care of the immature infant such as how to decide on whether or not an infant is too immature to warrant active resuscitation and how best the increasing demand for care of such tiny infants can be met. With the impending reorganisation of the National Health Service it is likely that these are issues which paediatricians will shortly need to address and it is unfortunate that more space was not devoted to them.

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Subspecialisation evolves: first there were fetomaternal medicine, then fetal medicine, and now fetal neurology. Advances in ultrasound have allowed study of the neurodevelopment of the fetus and form the basis for all the subjects covered in this
book. The lasting impression, however, is of how little we know at present about the factors controlling, modifying, or altering brain development in utero. The majority of the work reviewed is at a research stage and its clinical relevance is unclear or uncertain.

The 13 chapters are divided up into three sections—antepartum fetal assessment, intrapartum fetal assessment, and major specific fetal conditions. Because much of the presentations are controversial and the author(s) may have a biased viewpoint the practice of editorial commentary on each chapter is valuable and puts the subject into perspective, though they could have been more critical.

The major criticism is the excessive concentration on fetal hypoxia. Six chapters were concerned with this subject in one aspect or another (and contained information that has been regularly reviewed in other books and journals) and yet only one chapter dealt with fetal behaviour.

Another clear message from the book is that fetal neurobehavioural development will only be properly understood when the observations of various fetal neurological parameters are related to developmental outcome in infancy and childhood.

It may well be that the second edition of the book will be of more widespread clinical relevance and interest.

D JAMES
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Sophisticated study of the gait of 309 normal children in 10 age groups from 1–7 years makes a formidable story. Altogether 449 recordings were made on the volunteered subjects, over 90% of whom were white. The data and graphics presented may well become the basis for a future ‘expert’ system for gait analysis in children. This would be a ‘black box’ capable of collecting, processing, and interpreting the data on which clinical decisions can be made. Though the San Diego laboratory is among the most advanced in the world, their computer has had to deal with so much data that the turnaround time has been a problem. That will speed up. The difficult part will be programming the interpretation which depends on evidence for effective treatment of particular abnormalities of motion, electromyography, and force.

Some clinicians may find that the book offers more than they want to know about gait. There are 87 figures, 13 tables, and five pages of recording charts. One figure includes 24 graphs. In the middle of the book there are 80 pages of continuous figures. The complexity of the data is illustrated by the six pages explaining their mathematical treatment. The formulae underlying their ‘bootstrap’ technique are beyond the comprehension of a reviewer more familiar with shoestring methods.

Their anthropometric data are easily assimilated and helpful. The gait analysis system used four motion picture cameras, a force plate, and electromyography linked to a minicomputer. As a scientific study this monograph is a landmark. Departments of bioengineering, gait laboratories, physiotherapy teaching schools, and academic departments of orthopaedic surgery and paediatric neurology will find it a classic source of reference. If the next 10 years bring the data justifying its cost effectiveness, this approach will have been vindicated.

I McKinley
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This is not so much a textbook more a glossary of cases from Victor Dubowitz’s wide clinical experience. However, I suspect that there are many other paediatricians who like myself find the good presentation of a clinical case, demonstrating the features of a particular condition, a far more meaningful way to learn than a dry description of the condition itself.

The book, well titled as an atlas, covers all the major muscle disorders of childhood, the common and the uncommon, in its 182 pages, 80% of which are pictures. The layout is excellent. Each section starts with a short summary of the disease in note form in blue, easy to locate, tables. The summary covers definitions, age of onset, presenting symptoms, clinical signs, and associated features. The usual course and prognosis is described. Investigations, biopsy findings, genetics, and principles of management are outlined. These summaries provide a quick aide memoire, which will be useful for those studying for postgraduate examinations and those involved in teaching.

The case histories themselves are succinct and useful in that they describe the ‘not-so-typical’ presentations common in everyday practice, the multitude of children depicted in the super clinical photographs reflecting the weight of experience of the author. There are good illustrations of surgical appliances—braces, calipers, etc— which would be helpful for parents to see—all the children are smiling! The well reproduced biopsy pictures are well integrated into the text and therefore much more digestible than a separate section on biopsy appearances.

The section on investigations only describes needle muscle biopsy. The section on ultrasound is limited to only a short description. I would have preferred more detail with more photographs of ultrasound appearances of common disorders as this is an area unfamiliar to many paediatricians. The bibliography consists of only 10 references; a more comprehensive one would have been helpful.

The Atlas will appeal to general paediatricians as well as those with an interest in neurology and also to community paediatricians with responsibility for disabled children. It will also be of interest to other disciplines working with such children.

When this book arrived I immediately found myself searching through it for a description of the condition the name of which I had just seen that day for the first time on the biopsy result of a little patient of mine—I was not to be disappointed!

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Media and public obsession with the minutiae of medical wizardry, coupled with the occasional or frequent medical success...