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BOOK REVIEWS

Aberdeen Royal Infirmary — The People's Hospital of the North-East. I Levack and H A F Dudley Ed. Balliere Tindall Ltd, 1992. Pp ix + 274. Price N/K. Illustrated. ISBN No: 0-7020-1666-7.

This is a book that is full of interesting information but its layout is poor. The book contains the history of the practice of Medicine in Aberdeen over the past two and a half centuries.

The benefits of a medical faculty were brought to North Eastern Scotland at the behest of Pope Alexander (Borgia) IV at about the same time as another Italian was conferring other benefits on the inhabitants of the New World. In spite of such inspired beginnings the first few centuries were a bit sluggish due to the disinclination of successive Professors of Medicine to lecture on their subject. The Royal Infirmary therefore had its origins in the voluntary efforts of the people of the town. The town was full of infirm and poverty stricken beggars; so recognising that community care had had its day the burghers endowed a small institution to contain and cure them. The Infirmary just got going in time to be commandeered by Bonnie Prince Charlie's men as a military hospital, a function that it continued to fulfil when the Hanoverians re-occupied the town. Interestingly military patients received a large meat ration not available to the civilian patients who had to get by on their usual turnip and porridge diet.

The various advances in treatment are outlined. The tardiness with which some were accepted almost defies belief. One senior surgeon tried anaesthesia in the 1840s, found it not to his taste and continued to operate until the 1860s with three stalwarts restraining the conscious patient.

Other advances were accepted almost at once. X-Rays appear to have been in use in Aberdeen in the same year that Dr Roentgen demonstrated their properties.

The picture given is of gradual improvement and advancement albeit in an irregular and piecemeal fashion. In 1896 the Anaesthetic Dept and the Radiology Dept were subsumed in the person of one man, the Chloroformist and Medical Electrician — Dr Dalgarno. No danger of over specialisation there. Similar elaborations and divisions are described in other departments. The metamorphosis of the Lady Almoner into the modern social worker is documented here along with parallel developments in Dietetics and Occupational Therapy.

Where I feel the whole book falls down is in its multi-author presentation. Each discipline including the newer para-medical trades describes its origins and progress up to the present. There is a lot of repetition and even contradiction in the successive chapters. The picture is not clarified by the fact that owing to the paucity of surnames in the static population of North Eastern Scotland individuals with the same names appear doing similar jobs centuries apart. Each chapter seems to end on a note

of doom with the coming of the Hospital Trust and ruled by Accounts clerks.

I enjoyed the book but I feel that it would have been a much better book if a single author had been allowed to organise all the information it contains in a simpler manner.

R M L ANDERSON

Cardiology 1992. W C Roberts Ed. Butterworth Heinemann, 1992. £65.00. Pp xxv + 480. ISBN No: 0 7506-9318-5.

Cardiology 1992 is a distillate of 740 articles taken from 30 medical journals published in 1991. Summaries of these articles taken by 5 authors, including the editor, have been organised into various sections of 10 chapters making a readable book rather than a list of papers. The book is completed by both an author and subject index. The result is a book of 480 pages containing the most important papers of 1991.

It would prove very difficult for any practising clinician to scan all journals. Such a volume allows one to select a subject, refer to the text and be directed to either appropriate journals for an up to date review or have a precis of relevant papers concerning the subject with references to enable one to examine the original article in more detail.

The very number of papers and facts presented could easily have produced a dry publication. This is avoided by the small number of authors and final editing producing a uniformity of style. The added illustrations make this a very readable text.

I have only two criticisms of this book. The first is the cost — at £65 it is not cheap but one has got to accept a considerable amount of work has gone into producing this volume. The second is that the title is a little misleading. Cardiology 1992 summarises papers of 1991 not 1992. This is only a minor point and should not detract from the undoubted value of this book.

Cardiology 1992 would be well worth scanning through by membership candidates and is worthy of more attention by cardiologists and general physicians. It is very valuable in helping keep the busy practitioner up to date on a mass of publications. I look forward to Cardiology 1993.

N INESON

A Colour Atlas of Burn Injuries. J A Clarke. Chapman Hall Medical, 1992. Pp vii + 120. £49.95. Illustrated. ISBN No: 0-412-34840-3.

This atlas is one of a series some of which are also available in slides. The author is recognised as a very experienced expert in the field of burns management. The Regional Burns Unit at which he works has a justly deserved international reputation. The book is well presented, accurately printed and with excellent re-

production of the many coloured photographs. The quality of photography demonstrates the necessity for a Department of Medical Illustration with dedicated professional photographers who work in close association with clinicians. The drawings are clear although it has to be said that some of the colours chosen to represent pathophysiological changes in burnt skin tend to confuse rather than clarify what the author intends.

The format is of multiple, often sequential photographs with detailed legends. The text is sufficiently detailed to convey the necessary information and at the same time has the benefit of clarity and brevity. This makes the atlas extremely easy to read. The text is of necessity fairly didactic but most of the content is non-controversial and so I do not think this matters. In any case I feel that the book is intended to help the occasional burns surgeon faced with unfamiliar problems rather than the experienced burns specialist. Many decisions about management of the burn wound are made on the basis of appearance. Assessing the depth of damage is extremely difficult even to the most experienced but this publication goes a long way towards making that task easier for the surgeon faced with only occasional burns.

The atlas should be freely and readily available in all A&E departments. Its availability in all BMH libraries should encourage the general surgeon to consult its pages whenever faced by a patient with burn injury. The author and his publishers are to be congratulated on the production of such a user-friendly teaching aid. I encourage anyone involved in the occasional management of burns to read this book and study its photographs.

P CHAPMAN

Control of Hospital Infection: A Practical Handbook:

— 3rd Edn. G A J Aycliffe, E J L Lowry, A M Geddes and J D Williams Eds. Chapman & Hall Medical, 1992. Pp xi + 381. £45.00. ISBN No: 0-412-28440-5.

The third edition of the book has maintained the tradition of excellence of the earlier versions. The general layout follows that of the previous editions, but new sections have been made for subjects that have increased in importance.

The text is up to date, informative and its clarity makes it easy to read and understand.

As is stated in the preface, it is essentially a practical guide to the subject and reflects the problems that do occur in hospitals. It offers advice based on scientific principles and discounts the rituals that are still being practised despite current knowledge.

Reference is made to the majority of the UK Codes of Practice, but where the authors consider the advice inappropriate they have explained the reason.

The readership of the book should extend beyond those primarily responsible for overall control of infection in hospitals, as there are sections appropriate to the majority of disciplines within hospitals.

In the military setting there is much information rele-

vant to medical and dental units outside hospitals.

It is not a book that should be hidden on a library shelf, but copies should be readily available for those who need an immediate answer to a practical problem.

D N FAITHFULL-DAVIES

Near Misses in Cardiac Surgery. M E Lee. Butterworth — Heinemann, 1992. Pp xi + 146. Price N/K. ISBN No: 0-7506-9391-6.

Near misses in cardiothoracic surgery is not, as its title might imply, a lighthearted book, but a series of 40 cases in which events have not gone quite as expected due to diagnostic or therapeutic error or oversight.

Most of us enjoy reading the case histories published in their annual reports by the various protection societies and hopefully learning from others' errors. This book whilst giving the case history then follows with a solution, discussion and reference to enable the maximum benefit to be gained from each case.

Whilst all cases are based on cardiothoracic surgery this book would be of interest to most doctors and particularly those involved in cardiology and intensive care medicine. Candidates for most post-graduate examinations would not be wasting an evening with this book.

Finally, Dr Lee draws on 4 keys to facilitate the conversion of experience to action in the cardiac surgical arena. These are constant vigilance, communication, standardised approach that maintains simplicity and anticipation. These 4 keys can and should be applied to all branches of medicine.

Overall this is both an enjoyable and instructive book written in a very readable style. There are plenty of lessons in it for us all to learn.

N INESON

PORTON DOWN 75 Years of Chemical and Biological Research. G B Carter. HMSO Books 1992. Pp 106. £9.95. Illustrated. ISBN No.0-11-772732-6.

It is very appropriate that this short well-illustrated history of chemical and biological defence research at Porton Down should appear to mark the 75th Anniversary of the establishment in the aftermath of Operation Granby, to which it made such a vital contribution. Readers of this Journal will be interested to hear that, following German chlorine attacks in 1915, the earliest research into the protection of our soldiers was carried out in the 'Anti-Gas Department' at the Royal Army Medical College, Millbank, in the basement, where the earliest respirators were developed. The area of fine chalk at Porton to be known as the 'War Department Experimental Ground, Porton' was taken over and developed in 1916, with a major contribution from the Royal Engineers, who took a leading role in British chemical warfare for the rest of the 1914-18 war.

Defence against biological warfare became of interest as early as the 1920s and was a major focus of interest at Porton from 1940 onwards. Research of the highest sci-

entific standard in defence against chemical and biological warfare has continued to the present time, and proved of the greatest value in protecting British units in the Gulf conflict. Gradon Carter has worked at Porton since 1948 and he displays in this excellent book a detailed knowledge of the history of Porton and its personalities. The book is reasonably priced, well produced by HMSO, and profusely illustrated with archive photographs. It helps to demystify the subject of chemical and biological warfare and so is recommended to all Service medical officers of whatever specialty.

G O COWAN

Soundings from BMJ Columnists. Ruth Holland Ed. BMJ Publishing Group, 1992. UK £5.95/Overseas £7.00. Pp xi + 89. Illustrated. ISBN No: 0-7279-0776-X.

You should of course already have read most, if not all of these essays, reprinted from the BMJ series of the same name. Indeed such is the speed of the modern publication process that you may well even remember reading them! All the contributors are stimulating writers and however you react to this series there is something here for further bedtime reading. Eighty-nine pages contain provocation (Drife on prophylactic mastectomy), entertainment (Douglas attending a BATLS course), pathos (Douglas again on a thalidomide driver and Widgery on AIDS and the arts), irritation, common sense and much more besides. It is sad to record that David Widgery died within days of its publication.

Essays like these help to put a little common sense and perhaps humour back into medicine. Although they may

not be such timeless classics as Richard Asher's collection (Talking Sense) they deserve a place in your library.

PETER FABRICIUS

Understanding Benefits. 2nd Edn. S Ennals. British Medical Journal, 1992. Pp 80. UK £7.50/Overseas £9.00. Illustrated. ISBN No: 0 7279 0752 2.

In my capacity as a welfare worker I would find this publication invaluable. The claiming of benefits seems always to be hazy and little understood and working within a hospital I am frequently approached with financial queries regarding Social Security payments.

The information in this guide is amalgamated very clearly, starting with the introduction to the Social Security system and the distribution of benefits under the three categories of contributory, non-contributory and means tested. All the benefits are covered in more detail in the following chapters with helpful example scenarios for means tested benefits like family credit, income support, housing and community charge benefit. There is an opening emphasis on the close link between primary health care and Social Security benefits and this book would indeed be an important guide for GPs and all people working in health care. The information is revised and updated with all new rates of payment as of 1992 and an appendix lists the current payment structure.

This booklet should be on hand for anyone working in health care in order that people are properly informed of the financial support available in their specific circumstances.

SUE WRIGHT

OBITUARIES

Regimental Headquarters would welcome self written obituaries and when completed they should be forwarded to Regimental Secretary RHQ, RAMC, Keogh Barracks, Ash Vale, Aldershot, Hants GU12 5RQ.