Book Reviews


Eliot Slater's contributions to human genetics need no commendation to readers of this journal. The genetics of psychiatric disorders offer particular difficulties, for instance psychiatry has yielded neither clinically-distinct disorders nor biochemical markers that enable one to establish clean segregation. Yet Dr Slater's early work on manic-depressive psychosis (1936) and later on schizophrenia (1953, 1958) gave rise to theories that have not been superseded. The even more difficult problem of personality disorders (soldiers in a war-time neurosis unit being the seemingly unpromising subjects of study) led to two outstanding contributions on the neurotic constitution. It is remarkable how undated these papers are. Even more unusual in human genetics is the extent to which the subject matter, in this case psychiatry and the nosology of psychiatric disorders, has been enlarged by a genetical approach, for genetical predisposition to any disorder casts light on contributing environmental factors. Dr Slater has also made valuable contributions to methodology, as in twin-studies, fingerprints, and polygenic inheritance; and it is not only in these three subjects that he resembles Galton. His wide talents and interests are displayed in this volume; to choose but one example: 'Contributions to a pathography of the musicians'.

There is a fascinating and outspoken autobiographical sketch and retrospect. Autobiographies give a good account of what the author thought of those around him, but not the converse, and here alone Dr Slater's judgement has gone sadly astray. He states of a colleague: 'He was one of the small number of neurologists I have ever known who have had any respect for psychiatry.' Dr Slater's own personality and integrity transformed the status of psychiatry at The National Hospital, Queen Square, where he was in charge of the department for nearly 20 years. His neurological colleagues, and the residents attached to his firm, who were in close contact with him, have uniformly increased their respect for psychiatry, as a direct result of his influence; he displayed in his practice and his teaching a respect for facts and logic that is exemplified in these collected writings, and he has firmly established the unity of brain and mind in the conceptual thinking of a new generation of neurologists.

Happily this is no completed volume, and his contributions continue; one alone can be mentioned here, 'A psychiatric view of Shakespeare's sonnets' (Anais Portugueses de Psiquiatria, 1969, 21, 545–572)—may there be many more!

R. T. C. Pratt


This is a welcome book which covers in a well-written and concise way the rapidly evolving field of antenatal diagnosis. With the exception of the excellent sections by Scrimgeour the book has been written by members (or recent ex-members) of the Department of Human Genetics in Edinburgh. It is eminently practical in its approach with chapters on the indications for amniocentesis, detailed descriptions of the techniques and complications of amniocentesis and of other techniques for antenatal diagnosis, including radiography and amniography, fetography, placental and amniotic biopsy, fetoscopy, ultrasonography, fetal electrocardiography, and electroencephalography. Later there are more specific descriptions of the indications and techniques of antenatal sex determination, amniotic fluid cell culture, and of chromosome studies with a list of biochemical studies which may be carried out on amniotic fluid cells and the fluid itself.

The implications of antenatal diagnosis for the prevention of genetic disease are discussed by Brock. As experience grows and as new techniques are developed these techniques will have an increasing impact on the frequency of genetic disease. The techniques of early amniocentesis and fetoscopy are probably not without risk to the fetus, although the risk is perhaps much less than one might have imagined. However until the results of the several prospective trials now in progress in the United States and Britain are available it would seem prudent to limit the use of amniocentesis to situations where there is a high a priori risk of fetal abnormalities and a test system which has a high degree of reliability. Perhaps translocation mongolism provides the best indication for early amniocentesis, although anxious mothers of 35 or over should be offered the test. Others argue for screening of all pregnancies in women over 40 and even of all pregnancies. Antenatal sexing with a view to the abortion of male fetuses when a mother is known to be a carrier of an X-linked recessive disease is another reasonably clear cut indication. There are at present only a few clear biochemical indications for early
amniocentesis but the number will grow. Because of the rarity of most inborn errors the techniques necessary for the biochemical analysis of cell cultures or of amniotic fluids will be available in very few centres in the world and much cooperation between laboratories will be necessary.

The editors and authors of this volume are to be congratulated in undertaking a review of this embryonic area and for having produced such a useful and pleasantly written book. I hope they will be encouraged to keep pace with developments by producing a new edition at frequent intervals.

R. Harris

The Child with Down's Syndrome (Mongolism).

The parents of Down's syndrome children have been waiting a long time for a book of this sort and it will be most useful to them and to non-scientists interested in or working with Down's syndrome children. As a medical social worker, one greets it with enthusiasm. The explanation of chromosome behaviour is well done, the diagrams are clear and informative, and the terminology is particularly suited to the non-specialists. The explanation of amniocentesis is good and it is only a minor criticism that on page 19 it is suggested that parents should decide after amniocentesis whether or not to have a termination. Can amniocentesis be justified if a mother knows at the outset that she will not have a termination?

The book contains a welcome realistic appraisal of the social achievements of a Down's syndrome child and the kind of physical anomalies that might be present. The photo album of charming pictures includes patients of all ages; the babies are especially attractive and one hopes that parents will not be disappointed if they find that their own children are not quite so beautiful.

Chapter 4 gives some sensible and practical ideas—if indeed anyone can be practical in such an emotive situation—on acceptance, emphasizing the need to understand something of Down's anomaly and how it will influence the child and the child's whole family. If anything is missing here it is perhaps some facts and figures on numbers of adult mongols and their current care and activities.

Perhaps the best thing about the book and the way the subject is treated is that it will serve as a continuous source of reference. When all this information is packed into three or four specialist consultations it cannot possibly be retained; with the book, parents can turn to particular aspects when needed, reminding themselves of things they already know and looking up new information as and when they need it and can absorb it. More and more it is becoming obvious that total acceptance of a serious handicap in a child only comes over a long period and in that period a reference book is invaluable. Perhaps a British edition might be considered with information on facilities and provisions here. We are grateful to the authors for this sensitive, informative, and needed book.

Kathleen Evans
Antenatal Diagnosis of Genetic Disease

R. Harris

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