The Principles of Human Biochemical Genetics

3rd ed. By Harry Harris. (Pp xv + 558; figures + tables. US \$65.75, Dfl 135 hardback; US \$26.75, Dfl 55 paperback.) Amsterdam: Elsevier/North Holland. 1980.

This is the third edition of the standard book on human biochemical genetics published in the English speaking world. Though entitled 'Principles' it is sufficiently comprehensive in coverage of most of the important and interesting facts of the subject to serve as a textbook. In his prefaces to the three editions Harris has never made it clear at whom the book is aimed. Perhaps there is no need to do this, for there are items to please and instruct even those with the most casual interest in biochemical genetics, while for the professional the book is a goldmine.

Surprisingly, in view of the 5 years which have elapsed since the previous edition, the size has increased by less than 30%. The format is essentially unchanged. 'Inborn Errors of Metabolism' has been expanded and divided into two parts. 'Gene Mutations Affecting Rates of Protein Synthesis' has been dropped, since α -thalassaemia and HPFH can be satisfactorily dealt with under deletions. The HLA system has at last been recognised, having been ignored in earlier editions, but coagulation disorders are still not seen as part of biochemical genetics. I am distressed that a former Galton professor should allow his spelling to be Americanised by his Dutch publishers.

What about the 'new genetics'? Here Harris must be criticised. He devotes only three pages to restriction endonuclease mapping and five to polymorphisms at the DNA level in a total of 440 pages of text. For a book dated June 1980 this is hardly adequate. Exclusion of DNA from the subject index is another peculiarity. Biochemical genetics is going to be turned on its head by the powerful new tools which recombinant DNA technology has provided. Traditional biochemical geneticists may regret this and wish to continue working with the starch gels which have been so productive in the past. But there really is no alternative but to turn away from protein variants and grapple with the complexities of DNA biochemistry.

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Practical Genetic Counselling

By Peter S Harper. (Pp ix + 285; figures + tables. £12.50.) Bristol: Wright. 1981.

In my enforced inactivity during a recent holiday, Harper's book demonstrated its excellence. It was small enough to have been taken along in the first place, and by its pleasant style it diverted the mind from the somatic consequences of inexpert skiing. The essences of this book are its portability and completeness. It is an indispensable vade mecum for anybody concerned with genetic problems in medicine. Certainly paediatricians, obstetricians, and many others will find it easy to read and an unfailing source of rapid reference. I have no doubt that most clinical geneticists will also keep a covert copy in their briefcases, especially on peripatetic visits. Perhaps it is only genetic paranoia that makes one feel that one ought to have total recall, but Peter Harper's book certainly provides enough to get by on in difficult situations far from one's library. As a crib it is splendid, but it is more than that. The book describes in a readable and comprehensive way the basics of medical genetics taken to an appropriate level of complexity, falling just short of the point at which most clinicians will become confused. I strongly suspect that many people will understand for the first time the use of Bayes's method when reading this book. Its introduction to the history of the subject leads naturally into the present scope and the organisation of genetic clinics and one is presented with an irrefutable case for the importance of properly trained clinicians in the field of medical genetics.

The sections concerned with diseases of the different organ systems are extremely helpful. It is intended that these should be for the non-specialist (inherited disorders of neurology for non-neurologists, etc), but here again, most clinical specialists will be grateful for a readily accessible aide memoire to remind them of the inheritance of a particular disorder (whether in their specialty or not). The references provide ready access to the literature and are well chosen, but should be used in conjunction with other sources for the selection of primary material.

It would be cavalier to list the relatively small number of errors and omissions and I encourage people who spot peccadilloes to write to Peter Harper so as to encourage him to produce regular