Book reviews

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Prenatal Diagnosis and Mechanisms of Teratogenesis

Dysmorphology

Following the tradition set in previous volumes, volume 18 of Birth Defects: Original Article Series continues to use the 'mucopolysaccharidosis' system of numbering, that is, 1, 3, 5, and to alternate between Latin and Arabic (volume XVII has sections 1, 2, 3, 4, 6). This slightly eccentric approach extends to the choice of articles; thus the volume labelled Dysmorphology has an article on collagen synthesis by Duchenne myogenic clones and the one labelled Prenatal Diagnosis and Mechanisms of Teratogenesis has a whole section on perinatology.

In the volume on dysmorphology there are, as usual, many 'new' syndromes. While one applauds accurate reporting of clinical features, the insertion of too much jargon can leave the reader worrying about the precise meaning. For example, did the patient who could 'ambulate independently' do anything else besides walking? Did the patient with 'oligophrenic facies' look stupid? One wonders about the value of reporting 'A possible new short rib syndrome in two sibs' without clinical photographs or radiographs. Fortunately these cases, like others in the volume, have been published elsewhere.

The volume on Prenatal Diagnosis and Mechanisms of Teratogenesis contains useful reviews on hyperthermia and brain development, malformations in infants of diabetic mothers, the effectiveness of antenatal screening, and methods of diagnosing some bone dysplasias antenatally. However, one must remark that editorial control over the content of articles seems to have been non-existent. For example, the paper on 'Prenatal detection of a balanced translocation: a counselling dilemma' reports a single case of a balanced translocation found on amniocentesis (46,XY,t(5;11)(q33;p15.1)). The mother was found to carry an identical translocation. The infant was subsequently normal. This sort of case may cause much soul-searching in California, and indeed the family are thanked for allowing the investigators "to enter their private lives, become informed decision-makers, and ultimately chose, for themselves, the right option", but it must be a run of the mill event at other genetics units around the world.

In summary, these volumes are probably indispensable to active genetics units; nevertheless, erratic editorial policy, patchy quality, and a tendency for identical articles to be published elsewhere, are, to my mind, rapidly eroding the well deserved reputation of the Birth Defects series.

ROBIN M WINTER

Annual Review of Immunology

This is the 25th in a series of yearly volumes which aim to provide regular reviews of recent developments in the major sub-disciplines that comprise immunology because "... even the most diligent immunologist (cannot) .... remain abreast of important developments ... ". This book, excellent though it is, is rather specifically directed towards immunologists while geneticists of the clinical variety may not find too much of direct relevance to their work. There are, however, several sparkling contributions and I would recommend the chapter by Klein, Figueroa, and Negy for its zany approach to the major histocompatibility complex which has affected so many of us. This begins by describing the four tricks that MHC has played on us all: first discovered on red cells but irrelevant to their function; it forms the major barrier to transplantation but this is only on the fringe of its true physiological function; Ir genes turn out to be MHC genes themselves; and finally functionally unrelated interlopers like complement genes and 21-hydroxylase deficiency are included in MHC. This chapter ends with the 'Final Act' with its suggestion that the vast mass of MHC related information will quite quickly become largely redundant as molecular genetics explains all.

The first chapter is a fascinating account by Elvin A Kabat of triumphs, trials, and tribulations