Book reviews

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Familial Cancer

The concept that there is an important genetic component in the aetiology of many cancers is now widely accepted. Increasingly, attempts are being made to try to define this component and to understand the mechanisms by which it operates. This book presents brief reports of papers given at an international conference in September 1985 which dealt exclusively with this topic. It seems likely that by calling this the 'first' such conference the organisers are intending to indicate that other such meetings will follow rather than to suggest that there had been no previous meetings on this topic. They have acted admirably quickly in getting the book out within a few months of the meeting. This has, however, been achieved at some cost. There are approximately 75 contributions many of which are very brief indeed and really contribute remarkably little to our knowledge of this interesting area. The book is divided into several sections each dealing with a particular field, such as a group of related cancers, multiple cancers, genetic epidemiology, genetic markers, and specialised cancer registries. In spite of the shortcomings a number of interesting issues do emerge. There is a wide consensus throughout the book that a genetic element can be detected, using fairly conventional epidemiological techniques such as case control studies, in a wide range of human neoplasms. The one exception is the twin studies where data from the Danish group (Dr Holm and colleagues) shows "like sexed twins to have the same cancer morbidity as singletons". The Finnish study (Dr Kaprio and colleagues) shows so far that "analysis of concordances indicates that overall hereditary factors to not contribute much to the incidence of cancer". This apparent contradiction is of considerable practical importance. It could mean that genetic factors are unimportant (at least in the cancers studied), but it is also compatible with the concept that cancer occurrence is strongly dependent upon interaction between genetic factors and relatively rare environmental factors. The theme of genetic environmental interaction is a recurring one throughout the book and this, I am sure, is the way forward both for those interested in familial cancer and those committed to an environmental approach.

There are several contributions which do give a useful update in specific areas, for example, chapter by Filipovitch et al on the Minnesota Immunodeficiency Cancer Registry and by Lips et al on MEN 2. A few others have new data, such as an interesting family from Leverger and his colleagues at Hôpital St Louis with an association between particular haplotypes and three cases of ALL.

Overall, however, this is a disappointing book. Even a conference report, if it is to be published at all, should aim to present material which is detailed enough to give useful information and to provoke discussion or new ideas. It will probably be of most value to those not directly involved in cancer genetics, for example, to those in other areas of human genetics who want a fairly superficial skin over the surface of topics of current interest.

D G Harned

A Dictionary of Genetics

One of the tests of a good dictionary is the extent to which it tempts one to browse down the page after finding the entry one had initially sought. 'A Dictionary of Genetics' scores highly in this respect and contains numerous entries that will interest anyone with a little curiosity and remind him of facts forgotten and others never learned!

This is a clearly laid out book, with entries sufficiently detailed and descriptive to be of real help in understanding a particular concept. Illustrations are freely used and cross referencing is effective. While not especially written for the human medical geneticist, it covers all the areas relevant to Medical Genetics, apart from the names of syndromes and similar clinical points.

Passing the dictionary around the department produced general agreement among scientists, clinicians, genetics fieldworkers, and secretaries that it was clear and informative. A bonus is found at the end in the form of detailed chronology of major steps in genetics.

This book should be available in any genetics department, medical or otherwise; the clinical geneticist should find it particularly valuable as a reminder of the broad scientific base on which the specialists rests and the need for keeping fully informed of developments in fundamental genetics.

Peter S Harpe