LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Palmoplantar hyperkeratosis and deafness

I found the paper written by Sharland et al. most interesting. However, in addition to the reference to Bititci they mentioned, the combination of palmoplantar keratoderma and deafness has been described before, without widespread ectodermal dysplasia, in two atopic brothers, in two brothers in a later paper by Hatamochi et al. and in three female members of a family in two of whom there was evidence of minor atopy.

The extent of the keratoderma may vary and there does seem to be a wide range of onset of keratoderma from infancy to late childhood. This compares with the usual early infancy onset of dominant palmoplantar keratoderma when it occurs as an isolated abnormality.

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Historians have in recent years uncovered a rich seam in the history of human genetics and, in particular, eugenics. This book analyses the history of the Eugenics Society in Britain from the time of its inception in 1907 to its recent demise (at least in its original form). It is based mainly on unpublished papers held by the Society itself, which often give a more vivid reflection of the attitudes of those involved than do their publications. The author hopes that her account will not upset those in the Society who gave her free access to its records, but I expect that it will, at least for those whom the concept of eugenics still holds an attraction.

The Eugenics movement in Britain, led by the Eugenics Society, was in many respects a mirror for the views and prejudices of society, or more accurately the narrow segment of society which was predominant up to the end of World War II. The opening section shows how the Society was preoccupied by class, by the dangers that poverty and social injustice posed in threatening to overturn the established order, and how its proponents attempted to provide a valid biological basis to underpin their strategies. ‘Pauperism’, ‘the residuum’, ‘the dangerous class’ are terms that recur in the agenda of problems to be combated.

The author traces the closely intertwined development of eugenics and human genetics; the use of pedigrees, especially in relation to mental and physical handicaps, was often more polemical than scientific, though in contrast to America (and later Nazi Germany), the medical profession and politicians were never to accept the view proposed, that society as a whole would degenerate unless legal measures for isolation and sterilisation of affected people were adopted. Especially fascinating to geneticists is how the extraordinary talent in human genetics between the two world wars, including Haldane, Hogben, Fisher, and Penrose, was arrayed on both sides of the eugenics debate. Even the most convinced anti-eugenicists, such as Hardyor Meran, arrived at the same conclusion, that the eugenics movement would develop their mathematical approaches and main research areas around the problems dictated by the eugenics movement. The insights into the personalities of these remarkable scientists are also valuable in understanding how their attitudes were formed: Hogben and Penrose as conscientious objectors in the First World War, with Hogben imprisoned during the later part of it; Haldane embracing Marxism just before Hogben was becoming disillusioned with it; Fisher and his 17 year old bride farming a smallholding before his move to the plant breeding station at Rothamsted; what an amazing group of people were here!

In Britain the eugenicsists, and the Eugenics Society, largely lost their battle. The irony of Penrose, holder of the Galton Chair, stating that during his tenure ‘nobody taught eugenics and the Galton Professor of Eugenics was not a eugenicist’, and his changing the titles of his department and its journal from Eugenics to Human Genetics, can be seen as the end of eugenics as a coherent philosophy and policy in Britain, with the change of the Society’s name to ‘Galton Institute’ in 1989 as the epilogue to a long drama. It is now for the members of the new society to ensure that its policy is as new as its constitution.

In the closing pages of this valuable book, the author points out the dangers posed by the human genome project in providing the possibility of a ‘new eugenics’. These dangers are real, but, in Britain at least, I wonder whether we will be more likely to see eugenic policies again proposed as the answer to the deep seated social problems of deprivation, inequality, homelessness, and their attendant medical and educational as-
cpects. As the author points out, there can give pictures not so far removed from those of the Victorian England that gave rise to the deeply flawed science and damaging social philosophy of eugenics.

PETER S HARMER


These three publications are produced and distributed by the de Lange Syndrome Foundation in the USA. Cornelia de Lange syndrome is a rare developmental malformation syndrome and most clinical geneticists will only come into contact with a few cases in their working life. Publications like these are therefore of great value for providing information for families to take home and read at their leisure.

The fact sheet gives a comprehensive summary of the syndrome which would be useful guide for relatives, teachers, speech therapists, and anyone else who comes into contact with an affected child. A large part of the sheet gives information on the American Foundation and a request for donations which is not appropriate to the UK which has its own well organised parent support group.

The Parents’ Guide is a beautifully written booklet, and is by far the most useful publication of the three. The introduction states that it is designed to give both factual information and emotional support to parents facing the challenge of bringing up a child with the syndrome. Inserted throughout the text are quotes of parents’ own experiences of how they felt or coped with different challenges and problems. Sections on getting the diagnosis, medical problems commonly associated with the syndrome, language development, life expectancy, what to say to sibs, and how to cope with the reactions of grandparents and other adults are all included. This booklet contains the information that every new parent wants to know but will never find on the library shelves. The feelings and emotions expressed by the parents in this book make it an invaluable source of support and reassurance in counselling or caring for a child with a complex handicap.

The Foundation Album is a picture book of de Lange children whose families are members of the foundation. Under a photograph of each child is the family’s address and telephone number and a short summary of the child written by the parents. It is useful for families who wish to contact others in the same state or country, but most of the children included are from the USA. It would, however, be a useful book to lend to parents of a newly diagnosed case.

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NOTICE