
BOOK REVIEW

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Heredity and Your Family's Health. A Milunsky. (Pp 488; £14.00.) London: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1993.

As a family doctor with a special interest in medical genetics I read this book for my own education and also for possible inclusion on the patients' library shelf.

The opening chapter has a crusading quality and one assumes that the main readership is intended to be middle class America. Given the importance attached to non-directive genetic counselling, it is interesting to discern a slightly directive style. Dr Milunsky has clearly spent many years picking up the pieces following genetic catastrophes and he feels deeply about helping people to obtain the information to allow them to make the right choices. The issues raised are important and the comprehensive cover inspires one to read on, although some may disagree with the observation that "compassion, patience and love are unusual in most families caring for a child with birth defects".

The reader with at least high school biology will find the chapters on chromosomes detailed and understandable and the simple explanation of mitosis and meiosis is welcome. Here and elsewhere in the book doctors may benefit from technical descriptions of complex areas written for patients. Too often genetic nomenclature leaves even a

medical graduate feeling like a stranger in a foreign country.

Problems of intersex are dealt with sensitively but the reader looking for guidance on sex chromosome abnormalities, for example XXY or XYY detected at amniocentesis, may find this chapter unhelpful. The details of criminal trials involving defendants with XYY make uncomfortable reading. The separate chapter on fragile X is valuable because this alerts the reader to the salient features of the most common inherited cause of mental retardation and opens up avenues for seeking further guidance.

The chapter 'You and Your Genes' raises interesting questions about the mechanisms involved in the delayed onset of genetic diseases. This reader was grateful for the simple definition of a homeobox gene. However, the author omits to define hereditary and congenital which would be useful as these words are used throughout the book.

The chapter dealing with 'New Genetics' airs some difficult ethical dilemmas but it is surprising that the author does not place more emphasis on the reassurance given by negative genetic tests, and the consequent reduction of anxiety associated with reproduction. The short section on gene therapy does not mention cystic fibrosis, surely surprising when the hopes of so many patients are focused on this research.

The chapter on 'Genes, Ethnic Origins and Blood Groups' is probably too complicated for the lay reader, although the subject matter will be of great interest to a multi-racial readership.

There is a dispassionate discussion of the relationship of IQ to race and the interaction between genetic endowment and environment.

The chapter on 'Genetic Counselling' begins with the aphorism "... by not knowing you do not remove the chances you remove the choices". Dr Milunsky's commitment to helping couples avoid children with genetic defects is matched by a most valuable chapter which deals objectively with the practical and the ethical issues raised by genetic counselling. It would be a useful teaching aid for students. 'Drugs, Infections, Xrays and Habits Harmful to the Fetus' gives sensible and comprehensive guidance to anyone contemplating pregnancy.

The problems of population screening for Tay-Sachs disease, sickle cell disease, and thalassaemia are addressed in this book. It is timely to consider that genetics should be taken to the people rather than the individual patient taking his genetic problem to the doctor. This book goes some way to beginning this process. However, screening programmes should be undertaken only after extensive pilot studies and as a partnership process between the patient, the family doctor, medical geneticists, and others.

The section on the inheritance of common disease will leave the family doctor and his patients disappointed that clear genetic markers are still rare for breast cancer, ischaemic heart disease, colon cancer, and Alzheimer's disease. Such genetic markers as do exist show how these could translate into practical applications. Milunsky makes lifestyle recommendations which will be useful for both patient and doctor and the risk tables provided for some diseases will be helpful in the consulting room. The message undoubtedly is that family doctors should elicit, and patients should expect, a family history of common diseases to be taken. As the effects of the new genetics increases the precision of risk estimation, patients and relatives can be identified and offered appropriate advice and screening.

The legal lessons in prenatal diagnosis give only American examples but the points made are valid. Issues covered include the right to information, the right to choice, and the right that medical consultation should be free from the personal and religious bias of the doctor.

This is the comprehensively revised text of *Choices Not Chances* by the same author published in 1989. The information is as up to date as possible in this fast moving field where significant advances may happen between printing and publication.

I found reading this book a useful exercise, and many doctors will profit by having a copy handy when explaining things to patients or students. For more sophisticated patients and relatives, it will complement the information sheets produced by genetic charities and patient organisations.

HILARY J HARRIS

EDITOR'S NOTE

Journal of Medical Genetics: Cytogenetics Editor

Professor Pat Jacobs is standing down from this office at the end of 1993, after six years of valuable service. The *Journal of Medical Genetics* would like to thank her for her many

contributions and hard work during this time and is pleased that she has agreed to remain on the editorial board.

Professor Albert Schinzel of the Institute for Medical Genetics, Zurich, Switzerland, will become Cytogenetics Editor from January 1994. Professor Schinzel is well known

for his *Catalogue of unbalanced chromosome aberrations in man* and for his wider work in both clinical genetics and cytogenetics. The Journal welcomes him to the cytogenetics editorship.

PETER S HARPER