Book reviews


The student of connective tissue disorders has had a lean time of late. Fortunately help is now at hand. After a lengthy period of drought, those with an interest in these conditions can now wallow in the luxury of choosing between two large multiauthor textbooks published almost simultaneously to plug a gap which has existed for over 20 years. Both of these volumes succeed admirably in providing up to date reference sources with coverage of all the remarkable progress achieved over the last two decades.

There is a striking similarity between these books which extends beyond their titles to size, authorship, format, and style. Surprisingly no author has contributed on an identical topic to each volume, although several distinguished names feature in both. Has there been an element of collusion in these productions? In fact we should be grateful that for each disorder we now have two independent reviews which complement rather than duplicate one another. Individually each of these books is valuable. Taken together they provide a tour de force.

Each text opens with an introductory chapter outlining the basic principles of human inheritance and medical genetics. These chapters are followed by sections on connective tissue structure and function. Heritable Disorders opt for brevity with, for example, a single page devoted to elastin, which in contrast is the subject of its own 21 page chapter in Connective Tissue. Presumably this differing emphasis on basic biology reflects to some extent the background and interests of the respective editors. Peter Beighton seems to be catering primarily for medical geneticists, whereas Peter Royce and Beat Steinnann clearly have an eye on the basic scientist market also.

The remainder of both volumes is devoted to detailed accounts of individual connective tissue disorders. In maintaining the tradition of previous editions, Heritable Disorders is particularly strong on cutis laxa, the mucopolysaccharidoses, skeletal dysplasias, and the Weill-Marchesani syndrome. Connective Tissue barely mentions this last disorder but expands its coverage to include conditions with a secondary effect on connective tissue such as epidermolysis bullosa, prolidase deficieny, and the ichthyoses. Generally the clinical contributions in Heritable Disorders are more lavishly illustrated and more expansive. For example its chapter on Marfan syndrome extends to 84 pages with 55 illustrations and 528 references, as compared with 31 pages, 11 illustrations, and 276 references in Connective Tissue. However, both provide extremely comprehensive reviews and pass with flying colours this reviewer’s test of discoursing on the difficulty of conveying or refuting this particular diagnosis in equivocal clinical cases.

In summary, both of these books are excellent. Each provides a scholarly overview of their subject without sacrificing the self-supporting departmental library can consider itself complete. Heritable Disorders scores highly in terms of cost and production quality with the excellent illustrations, Table of Contents, and larger type. This will probably be the first port of call for the practising clinician. Connective Tissue offers a more cosmopolitan authorship with much greater depth in basic biology and science. Essentially “you pay your money and you take your choice”. Either way you will not be disappointed.

I D YOUNG


This volume lives up to its name. It is concise, and covers the topics with which an undergraduate medical student is likely to be familiar. Some familiarity is useful for preclinical and clinical students, and provides a reasonable core of content. The systematic description of mendelian and polygenic disorders that are likely to be seen, or at least mentioned, in other sections of the clinical course is a great strength. In comparison with some of the competitor volumes, I can recommend this as the undergraduate medical student’s book. Some other texts are more appropriate for the student who is specifically interested in genetics and the scientific basis of medicine.

This fourth edition has been adequately updated. Already some details require amendment, but that is only to be expected. The only areas that I feel are “essential” and that have not been adequately covered are the closely connected areas of the psychosocial impact of genetics and the ethical issues raised in clinical genetic practice. These areas would be very difficult to cover in a volume of this sort, but I hope that they are attended to in the fifth edition that I am sure, will deservedly follow too long.

ANGUS CLARKE


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 genetic counselling will be 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 sens-