Book reviews

General medicine

The Oxford Medical Companion, J Walton, JA Barondess, S Lock. pp 1038. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994. £40.00

The *Oxford medical companion* is really a second edition of the *Oxford companion to medicine*, which was published in 1986. The latter came in two volumes, weighed 3 kg, and consisted of some 1500 A5 pages. In contrast, this new volume is a little lighter (2.5 kg) and shorter (1000 pages of quarto size). The book has, however, retained its (A-Z) encyclopaedia approach, but is an encyclopaedia with no photographs and very few figures or tables. As before, it is still a book of many parts, some of which are well done, others less so.

In part, this is a biographical dictionary, with brief details of famous doctors and their contribution to medicine. Besides fame, or an obscure eponymous syndrome, the other essential criteria is that the doctor must be dead. For reasons of space, the entries are succinct and no longer include details of degrees (eg, FRCP, FRS, etc) which were included in the first edition. Nor are there any photographs of the famous. For the student of famous doctors, there are better books.

In part, this is also a medical dictionary, with explanations of simple medical terms (eg, circle of Willis, circulation, circumcision, cirrhosis). Unfortunately, the classical derivation of these terms is not usually given. For the medical secretary or lay person, there are better medical dictionaries.

In part, this is a history of medicine. Thus there are more extensive review articles on, for example, medicine in Scandinavia, medicine in South-East Asia, medicine in Spanish-speaking countries, and medicine in the Arab world. This, in my view, is where the book really comes into its own. The articles will be of interest to the lay reader, doctor, and medical historian alike. Each article is really an essay, which is clearly written, though again could have been made more reader-friendly by greater use of illustrations.

Finally, in part this is a medical textbook with reviews of common medical conditions and treatments (eg, radiotherapy, rehabilitation, rheumatoid arthritis). There are also useful references for further reading. As such, this will be a useful reference source for the lay reader.

Despite these reservations, at £40 for a book of over 1000 pages, this is outstanding value. Perhaps its cheapness reflects the lack of any photographs and the limited numbers of figures and tables. The editors indicate that the aim of the book is to be a comprehensive reference book for both health professional and layman. Certainly it has achieved the latter, if not the former.

CR HIND
Editor

Medical ethics

Moral matters. Ethical issues in medicine and the life sciences, A Caplan, pp xii + 198. John Wiley, Chichester, 1995. £12.50, paperback

This book is an interesting collection of articles, most of which were first published in an American newspaper. Rightly, it was thought that they deserved a wider audience. The compilation remains topical and although the essays were written for Americans, the British reader will find much in this broad selection of subjects, from contraception through helmet-free motocycling to euthanasia, to fascinate.

Each article is quite short but the topic is argued effectively, allowing the reader to understand the argument and, in many cases to see where the author stands on that particular issue.

Teachers of ethics will find a wealth of valuable material with which to challenge their students into discussion and debate. Parents will find many of the subjects provoke their families into true conversation and the casual reader will have food for thought.

This is a book to dip in to; to turn to when argument seems to be floundering. Unusually Caplan does guide the reader towards answers to some of the more difficult problems society faces at the end of the 20th century. Unfortunately the price may prevent this book being as widely read as it deserves. It is, after all, only a paperback collection of previously published material.

C FELLIS
20 East End Road, Finchley,
London N3 3QT, UK

Epilepsy

Idiopathic generalized epilepsies, A Malafosse, ed. pp xxii + 538, illustrated. John Libbey, London, 1995. Hardback

For many years epilepsy has been a field in which there were few exciting advances. Management was dependent on a number of older drugs developed from empirical screening programmes that were detached from any understanding of the basic mechanisms that might be involved in the human epilepsies. This picture is changing dramatically, driven by the rapid advances being made in basic neuroscience, molecular biology, and advancing applied technology.

The idiopathic generalised epilepsies make up approximately 20–30% of human epilepsies and are defined clinically by specific age-related syndromes in which a restricted number of seizure types occur. Most physicians will be aware of childhood absence epilepsy, though fewer recognise a somewhat more common juvenile myoclonic epilepsy. These syndromes are associated with generalised spike wave discharge in the EEG and by a clear-cut pattern of genetic susceptibility.

This volume is the product of a symposium that took place in April 1993. It brought together clinicians, neurophysiologists and geneticists and provides a reasonably topical summary of a rapidly changing field. The clinical heterogeneity of the different syndromes of idiopathic generalised epilepsy is well discussed by a number of authors, but the contributions by Panayiotopoulos and Delgado-Escueta are particularly useful in the areas of absence syndromes and juvenile myoclonic epilepsy, respectively. The inc-

lusion of a chapter containing an English translation of Dieter Janz's original description of impulsive petit mal is a great treasure. The chapters dealing with the role of the thalamic low-threshold calcium currents and thalamoreticular GABA B receptors in generating recurrent inhibition and burst firing of cortical neurons is well covered. These serve to dispel the simplistic concept of epilepsy merely as a disorder of hyperexcitability of the nervous system and emphasise that enhanced inhibitory inputs within appropriately structured neuronal circuits have equal relevance to epilepsy.

Anyone reading this book will immediately understand the excitement and pace of advances in this area. It provides a very satisfactory summary though inevitably it is already out of date with the recent identification of the gene responsible for benign familial neonatal convulsions as being a mutation affecting a nicotinic acetylcholine receptor gene. This is a book that will be enjoyed and will be informative to anyone with a major interest in epilepsy and its management. It does, however, require at least a moderate level of background expertise.

D CHADWICK
Department of Neuroscience,
Walton Hospital,
Liverpool C9 1AE, UK

Autobiography

Reflections and recollections from a long life in medicine, JG Waldenstrom. pp 137, Il Pensiero Scientifico Editore, Rome, 1994. ISBN 88-7002-654-X

Jan Waldenstrom was born in 1906 into a strongly medical family. His grandfather was professor of medicine in Uppsala and his father was professor of orthopaedic surgery in Stockholm. He trained in Uppsala, spent his student elective with Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins and Joseph Needham in Cambridge, and a research training in Munich. His biochemical and metabolic training stood him in good stead for it led to many firsts including Waldenstrom's chronic active hepatitis, Waldenstrom's macroglobulinaemia, and sarcoid uveoparotitis. He coined the term monoclonal gammopathies and made fundamental contributions on the carcinoid syndrome and porphyria.

He had been honoured by the Royal College of Physicians of London, the University of London, the Royal Society of Medicine, the University of Oxford, the US National Academy of Sciences, the French Academy of Sciences, and of course, numerous universities worldwide.

His autobiography is a joy to read for it brings to life the great medical academics of the last 50 years or so; and it transports the reader to medical centres worldwide. May he continue to divert us with a further edition of anecdotes, reflections and recollections.

DG JAMES
Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine,
London NW3 2PF, UK