Book Reviews

Aids to Psychiatry, Second Edition, H.G. Morgan in collaboration with M.H. Morgan. Pp.183, illustrated. Churchill Livingstone, Edinburgh, London, Melbourne, New York, 1984. £5.50.

There has long been a vogue for short text books crammed with lists of facts specially designed for last minute pre-examination swotting. Though in theory this is a useful concept, in practice it has the potential drawback of lulling the candidate into a false sense of security by leading him to assume that the book contains all the facts needed for the examination itself regardless of what is written in the forward. In extreme cases trainees may use a crammer as their sole source of reading material on a topic. Finally it can also have the disadvantage that the trainee will use a book at the expense of making his own set of annotated notes and thereby be deprived of a useful learning process.

Turning to the relative merits of this book in particular as opposed to the concept in general. It is composed of three parts with ninety per cent being devoted to Part I – Clinical Psychiatry. This covers psychopathology, the various diagnostic clinical entities commonly encountered in psychiatry and specialist topics. As a crammer the content is mostly adequate but no better, except in the case of suicide and non-fatal deliberate self-harm—particular interests of Professor Morgan—which are, as one would expect, well covered. Part II is a brief résumé of neurology and neurophysiology in relation to psychiatry while Part III gives much needed advice to candidates taking psychiatry examinations. This last section appears to be particularly directed to those trainees taking the examination for membership of the Royal College of Psychiatrists though the book itself is in my opinion more appropriate to those of a somewhat lower level of psychiatric sophistication. The style is clear and relatively easy to follow and for each topic discussed there is a small number of references for further reading.

In conclusion, leaving aside the merits or otherwise of crammer books in general this particular one is perhaps just adequate without being exceptional.

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The Arthritis Book. A Guide for Patients and their Families, Ephraim P. Engleman and Milton Silverman, British edition adapted by Robin Withrington. Pp.88, illustrated. Penguin Books, London, 1984. £1.95.

As its sub-title implies this is a book for the lay public. The claim to provide a clear, compassionate and expert handbook on all aspects of arthritis within the compass of 88 pages, including an index, is over ambitious. The art of popularising science is not an easy one and is made the more difficult by transposing an American work into the British situation. The general introductory chapters on the scope of the problem ‘scene of the crime’ begin by lumping together all kinds of arthritis and quoting unhelpful overall statistics, yet the individual chapters on the separate diseases, rheumatoid arthritis, osteo-arthritis and lupus are very useful introductions for the lay person. The simplified account of the pathology of rheumatoid arthritis is particularly well done. Unfortunately, the illustrations throughout the book, which must have begun as good line drawings, have become so condensed that the detail is lost to the extent that the layers of structure labelled in the joint cannot be individually seen, and in one instance the reader is further confused by having a normal joint and an abnormal joint depicted in opposite positions. There are areas of undue pessimism such as the statement that ‘few orthopaedic surgeons have been trained in joint replacement surgery’ and ‘that a total hip replacement operation takes three hours’. Possibly this is true in some parts of America, but hardly in the UK in 1984. The handling of drug therapy leaves many questions unanswered and the recurrent references to phenylbutazone as a suitable drug for treatment of various rheumatic diseases would have been unfortunate even before the recent banning of the drug in the UK. The use of corticosteroid therapy is handled in the customary enthusiastic way still current in some parts of the United States, and side effects such as induction of diabetes find no place. The handling of side effects of chloroquine and of some other drugs is such as to raise considerable alarm in the reader without giving sufficient information for a considered judgement or choice to be made.

The section on spinal disorders is curious in that it entirely omits a discussion of intervertebral disc disease as a cause for back pain. It certainly cannot be implied that all such pain is due to osteoarthritis of apophyseal joints. In the diagnosis of ankylosing spondylitis it is stated on the one hand that the