Book Reviews


This volume consists of fifteen review chapters covering numerous important aspects of intensive care medicine from metabolism to nutrition in the critically ill paediatric and adult patient. Specific problems such as diabetic ketoacidosis or hyperglycaemic non-ketotic coma, disturbances of adrenocortical and thyroid function, calcium, magnesium and phosphate metabolism in the critically ill patient are all discussed in individual chapters. The remaining five chapters cover the role of prostaglandins in cardiopulmonary and other critical illnesses, the diagnosis and management of endocrine tumours that often result in crisis situations, such as insulinoma and pheochromocytoma, and the influence of neuropeptides in critical care.

It will be appreciated from the description of its contents, that a better title would have been 'Metabolic and endocrine aspects of acute illness'. The authors are all from American Institutes and therefore certain drugs, e.g. methimazole for thyrotoxicosis, in common practice there, are inappropriate for UK medicine. On the other hand I was surprised that the effect of etomidate, the anaesthetic drug, on the pituitary-adrenal axis was not discussed in the chapter on the adrenal cortex.

This book is aimed at nurses as well as anaesthetists, physicians and surgeons with a special interest in intensive care medicine. Most of the reviews are sensible, comprehensive and well-referenced. However, at £39 the book is expensive and most of the information is available elsewhere.

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There are few up to date books on anaesthesia for neurosurgery and any new addition is welcomed with enthusiasm. This multi-author text has sixteen contributors including the editor. All the authors are from the United States and this book therefore reflects solely American medical practice. The book begins with a somewhat pretentious foreword by Hubert Rosomoff, followed by a good historical introduction by the editor. It is then divided into four main sections—cerebral physiology and evaluation, neurosurgical anaesthesia, central nervous trauma and postoperative and intensive care. The book concludes with a chapter on brain death.

The first section is very uneven. The initial very important chapter on cerebral haemodynamics and metabolism is poor and understanding of vital pathophysiology is hindered by the lack of diagrams. The other chapters in this section are adequate but have been better covered in other textbooks.

The second section on neurosurgical anaesthesia is much better. Indeed, the chapter on posterior fossa surgery includes the first accurate discussion, in a major textbook, of the pathophysiology of air embolism during neurosurgery in the sitting position.

The third section on head injuries and spinal cord trauma is adequate but would benefit from more subheadings in the text.

The book is well produced with few typographical errors. This book should probably be purchased for departmental libraries mainly on the strength of its section on neurosurgical anaesthesia. For the trainee, 'Handbook of Neuroanaesthesia' is a better and cheaper introduction to the subject.

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The title of this book encapsulates an important concept. It is not, of course, a new concept: indeed, the idea that clinical biochemistry might be anywhere not near the patient would have astounded past generations of doctors. But the fact that the title today strikes an almost revolutionary note illustrates how far bedside and laboratory practice have drifted apart. The effect has been woeful on both. As laboratories offer potentially more and more refined ways of diagnosis they are used by clinicians with less and less discrimination. As new diploma and degree courses ensure that a new breed of science graduates are increasingly committed to a clinical orientation, the chances of their knowledge being put to practical use are becoming progressively dim. The paradoxes could be multiplied. Probably the only beneficiaries of the trend have been the makers of laboratory equipment (one of the few success stories in industry over the past quarter century); and even here profits to the makers and value to the users have not always run in parallel. Can the trend be reversed? And if so, how? The introductory chapter by the editors raises high hopes: they may not provide good answers but they raise good questions. The remaining chapters do not quite fulfill these hopes. Only R.C. Rock comes near to addressing himself to the practical difficulties that a fundamental rethinking of the roles of clinical biochemistry and of clinical biochemists would raise. It would require more than new machines and new methods. Attitudes would have to change. Training would have to be readjusted. Career structures and personal career prospects would be affected. Professional territorial imperatives might have to be questioned and even breached. Compared to these problems the aspects of bedside biochemistry discussed by most of the
contributors (informatively and concisely by some, at tedious length by others) are almost peripheral. Yet the very fact that the subject has been raised is immensely significant. The notion that bigger, more centralised, more highly mechanised and more computer-oriented laboratories are necessarily better has become a hallowed doctrine: even to question it invites ridicule or worse. A similar death wish was required thirty years ago for questioning the unique and transcendent wisdom of high-rise blocks as a means of housing ordinary people.

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This is the second volume in the new series Progress in Critical Care Medicine and looks at the subject purely from the medical point of view. The material has been well selected by the editor Dr McCaffree from papers presented to the annual Critical Care Medicine Course held in Oklahoma in 1984. Each contribution is brief and will have particular appeal to those who want to know what is happening in the field of Critical Care. It is particularly recommended to doctors whose prime speciality is not internal medicine.

The chapter on pitfalls in the interpretation of haemodynamic data by Paul Carlile is most welcome and reminds us of the difficulties in particular of pulmonary wedge pressure measurements as well as concisely explaining what the problems are. This contribution is among six about the cardiovascular system, the others dealing with hypertensive emergencies (which is too brief), drugs used in the hypoperfusion syndrome, pulmonary thromboembolism, the selection of intravenous fluids for resuscitation and blood and its substitutes.

The three chapters on sepsis and infections are important. More than 6 million hospital days in the United States are attributed to prolongation of patient stay for the treatment of nosocomial infections. It does no good to save a patient by using complicated technology if he ultimately succumbs to such infection. Sepsis accounts for almost a third of intensive care unit (ICU) infections with a mortality as high as 50% in some situations. Indeed, Edward Viner’s personal account of the absolute misery of being on the receiving end of mechanical ventilation for 31 days in the ICU would never have been written if he had not become infected. This personal account should be mandatory reading for anyone who works in an ICU. We are reminded by other contributors in the section on metabolism that infection often predisposes to diabetic ketoacidosis or thyroid storm. In addition to these two specific chapters on diabetic ketoacidosis and coma, and on thyroid and adrenal disorders there are chapters on hypotraemia, hyperosmolar states and metabolic acid-base problems.

Status epilepticus is a topic that tends to get forgotten in other books or else poorly done; Peggy Wisdom’s chapter here is very clear and helpful. The chapter on mechanical ventilation serves really as a very basic introduction to the subject as it is the intention to consider respiratory failure in a later volume. However, a very brief section indeed on mechanisms of acute lung injury by Sami Said serves to whet the appetite.

Tom Petty has contributed an excellent essay on mechanical ventilation and human ethics. He writes with over 20 years of nearly daily experience with ventilator patients and he explores some of the issues concerning the ethical use of mechanical ventilation in critically ill patients. It is compulsive reading.

The oliguric patient and dialysis are considered in two separate chapters which are good summaries of the subject.

The therapy and prophylaxis of acute upper gastro-intestinal bleeding is nicely summarized by Robert Lankin. Nutrition in the ICU is the subject of another chapter and given that this is a very difficult subject the authors have provided a very useful overview; they have also considered the special situations of severe respiratory disease, and of renal and hepatic disease. This is supported by a good account of the disorders of potassium, calcium, magnesium and phosphorous in another chapter.

The chapter on the determination of drug dose in the critically ill patient is of great interest; brief pharmacokinetic effects are mentioned and the problems of choosing an appropriate drug and devising an appropriate dosage regimen are outlined. The final chapter is on poisoning where diagnosis and initial therapy are detailed, followed by consideration of specific poisons including aspirin which is still responsible for a significant number of critical poisonings.

This volume is highly recommended to anyone who is interested in intensive care.

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In a short review, I can only indicate the context, and to a limited degree the content, of this excellent book. It is the second volume of a four-volume textbook, of which the first volume dealt with the history and general principles of public health; the third deals with investigative methods in public health; and the fourth with applications to specific diseases, physiological systems, and client groups. The general title of the present volume is ‘Processes for Public Health Promotion’: and it deals specifically with control of the environment and of infections; with primary health care and public health services; and with public health strategy and policies in the UK and the USA.

That this textbook is not narrowly conceived is perhaps shown by the largest single section being that devoted to ‘primary health care’. Although one of the models used is Australian, the other is general practice as we know it in the UK, ably described by Howie and Porter of the Edinburgh