Book Reviews

Common Medical Emergencies: a Guide for Junior Physicians
Fourth edition, R.H. Salter. Pp. vii + 136, illustrated.
Wright, Bristol, 1987. £4.95.

This pocket sized guide has now appeared in its fourth edition since original publication in 1968. In short, clearly written chapters Dr Salter describes and gives straightforward advice on the emergency inpatient management of most medical illnesses.

He has been selective and asserts that the conditions included constitute 95 per cent of all acute medical admissions. Certainly the majority of important emergencies are covered but there are one or two omissions. There is no advice on the management of severe vertigo, no mention of the sick-sinus syndrome, no suggestion that transient loss of consciousness or dizziness or sudden chest pain can be caused by hyperventilation, no exposition of the initial management of pneumonias occurring in the absence of prior chest disease.

However, his succinct descriptions and the advice given on management are very sound and in the main very up to date. His suggestions concerning the use of lumbar puncture in neurological emergencies and the space he allots to barbiturate overdose have escaped the revisionary net.

The book is aimed at pre-registration house physicians and should be used only alongside the close supervision and guidance of more experienced doctors. This point is well made by the author, but four editions of the book in less than twenty years suggests that house physicians have found it, and will continue to find it, very useful.

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Intestinal Obstruction, edited by L.P. Fielding. Pp. 177, illustrated. Churchill Livingstone, Edinburgh, London, Melbourne, New York, 1987. £30.

This is the thirteenth volume in an interesting series of publications termed 'Clinical Surgery International'. These each study one major surgical subject in depth in contributions by a group of specialists under one or more guest editors. The present volume deals with the important, common and still highly dangerous emergency of intestinal obstruction. Its editors have collected 20 contributors from the United Kingdom and the USA. These include, as well as abdominal surgeons, an anatomist, a physician and two radiologists.

In the first part of the book, the basic science of intestinal obstruction is considered in depth, with chapters on embryology, surgical anatomy, pathophysiology, blood flow and peristalsis in the obstructed bowel, the haemodynamic changes during bowel obstruction and the systemic effects of this emergency. In the second part, on clinical and operative management, the current views and alternative therapies in

ters deal with clinical presentation, radiology, operative techniques with and without associated vascular impairment, large bowel obstruction, pseudo-obstruction and the management of that difficult problem of post-operative obstruction.

The book is pleasantly produced, well-illustrated with clear line diagrams and X-rays and provided with an extensive and up to date bibliography. It is certainly a volume that every general surgeon will benefit from reading.

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A Clinician's Companion: a Study Guide for Effective and Humane Patient Care, Joseph S. Alpert and Stephen M. Wittenberg. Pp. xii + 207, illustrated. Little, Brown, Boston, Toronto, 1986. £13.75.

The authors deal with the humanitarian aspects of patient care not the hard facts, claiming that medical education has neglected the art, which changes little, in favour of the science which is rapidly outdated. They offer their text as a background to courses in medical humanities.

Three main topic groups are covered. Firstly those dealing with patient care include sections on clinical judgement, difficult patients, compliance with treatment, breaking bad news, and medical ethics. More specific clinical problems discussed are the management of pain, insomnia, anxiety and risk factors. While the latter may not be well taught in medical school they belong more in a conventional medical textbook. Lastly there is a useful account of the clinician's management of himself: his continuing education; the image of the doctor; relationships with other professionals and the burnout syndrome.

The authors back their mature advice occasionally with hard research mostly with anecdotes and a weakness is that these and some other material are sometimes more relevant across the water. Thus the insensitive physician advising the patient to pick his own neurosurgeon is unbelievable and the sensitive doctor discussing pre-malignant change in the cervix appears to be wearing hobnail boots. Nevertheless many insights are universal.

My initial reaction was that these matters are not learnt from a book at all. Doctors need innate commonsense and compassion and these qualities are best fostered by contact with a senior colleague possessing them. On the other hand benefit must be derived from the discussion of specific problems. The overloaded undergraduate curriculum may not tolerate another subject but young doctors with spare time from study who read this book are likely to improve their overall management of patients.

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