

Book Reviews

The Biological Basis of Disease – Selected papers by P.R.J. Burch, edited by M.S. Chesters & J.E. Burch. Pp. 280, illustrated. Leeds University Press, Leeds, 1990. £14.95 \$25 paperback.

Like Coleridge, my mind is in a state of philosophical doubt. Reading this collection of papers by the late Philip Burch, formerly Professor of Medical Physics at Leeds, is unnerving. In the first part growth, disease and cancer are neatly explained by a unifying theory of autoaggression initiated by cellular mutation – and then, almost as an afterthought, follows a series of devastating critiques of epidemiology, in particular reference to risk factors in coronary disease and the association of smoking with lung cancer.

If one accepts the mathematical arguments on autoaggression (and what is good enough for *Nature* is good enough for me) then the theory is utterly credible. What is covered is of great interest to a rheumatologist. And this is why I am unnerved and why I doubt; for until I was sent this book to review I had never heard of Philip Burch! Yet if his theories are as sound as they appear, why not? He does not figure in my rheumatology or immunology bench books. Ten rheumatology friends appear unaware of his work. Is Burch simply wrong and discredited, or is his collaborator Burwell correct in suggesting that Burch's theories were ahead of his time, only now able to be tested, now that we have sophisticated techniques of gene sequencing and functional analysis?

Surely I will now be chastised for my ignorance of Burch. but while this is a book that has made me think, and worry (it has taken me 2 months to read and re-read it, let alone summon the courage to commit my admissions of ignorance to paper), I don't see how its thought provoking qualities can be brought to general attention. Its cover does not leap out and grab you; something could be done about this. It is hardly popular writing of the Gamow mode. I doubt that I would have bothered with it had I not been coerced. Yet it exerts a peculiar fascination; perhaps it should be a set book for senior registrars, or even Clinical Tutors.

I look forward to learning whether Burch was up a blind alley, or whether I have been reading the work of an unrecognized genius, but while I would be quite proud to admit the latter I will stick, for safety, to philosophical doubt.

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Alzheimer's Disease: towards an understanding of the aetiology and pathogenesis, edited by D.C. Davies. Pp. vii + 136, illustrated. John Libbey, London, Paris, 1989. £18, US\$35, FF215, hardback.

I read this monograph in the keen expectation that, finally, we are getting somewhere with Alzheimer's disease. Dr Davies has brought together a strong team of clinicians and basic scientists who, between them, know where research is going. It is no fault of the writers that the

reader still does not fully understand the inheritance or mechanism of Alzheimer's disease, and the title stresses this point. It is a vast subject and much has been learnt in recent years; a lot is summarized succinctly in this monograph, and anyone wishing to learn more will find the references exhaustive.

There are reviews of the clinical, neuropsychological and pathological substrates of the disease. There is a detailed discussion about the ultrastructure and chemistry of the neurofibrillary tangle and senile plaque. Neurochemistry and genetics are also covered, though it is clear that the latter is still the least well understood part of the puzzle.

The content of each chapter will appeal to different individuals depending on their interests. Those on the clinical and pathological aspects contain good, up to date, reviews of our present understanding of, and difficulties encountered in, the diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. That on the neurochemistry provides more lists than I find palatable, but would form a useful starting point for anyone researching the subject. Those on the pathogenesis and progression of pathological change, the immunochemistry of the tangle, trace elements, and the structure of the plaque and cerebrovascular amyloid are interesting but perhaps too technical for most clinicians. There is an interesting review of experimental models.

All in all this is a good technical monograph, well produced and illustrated. It should be read by neurologists, psychiatrists, geriatricians and psychogeriatricians. others might be more selective, but would gain considerable insight into the remarkable development in this dreaded disease made in recent years.

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Family Medicine: Principles and Practice. Third Edition, edited by Robert B. Taylor. Associate Editors: John L. Buckingham, E.P. Donatelle, Thomas A. Johnson Jr and Joseph E. Scherger. Pp. xxxviii + 743. Springer-Verlag, New York, Berlin, Heidelberg, London, Paris, Tokyo, 1989. DM 280.

This book, which is now in its third edition, is divided into two distinctly separate parts. The first, consisting of 11 chapters, is devoted to the principle concepts of family medicine that provide the philosophical basis of the discipline and distinguish it from other specialities. It includes topics such as models of health and illness, human development and ageing, family centred health care, clinical reasoning and problem solving, health promotion and interviewing and communication skills. The second part is devoted to clinical practice and has 29 chapters, organized partly under specific organs or systems and partly deals with the clinical problems related to specific target groups, such as the young, the elderly, drug and alcohol abusers, and also specific issues of public and environmental health.

The book, which has been written and edited by American family doctors, provides a very comprehensive