BOOK REVIEWS

PARAVERTEBRAL BLOCK: MINOR SYMPATHETIC SURGERY
Felix Mandl
(translated by Gertrude Kallner)

Though the cause and cure of pain is always a central theme in medicine, the amount of active interest in it fluctuates. Before the recent war there were signs that a period of increased activity, both clinical and experimental, in this subject was beginning. The tendency was given a fillip by the material unhappily produced by the war; particularly perhaps, by the occurrence of that most fascinating of painful states, causalgia. Dr. Mandl’s book on paravertebral block, essentially a contribution to the study of pain, as he makes clear in his introduction, is therefore especially topical.

The technique and complications of the injection are adequately treated in the first part of the book. The author maintains that the unpleasant sequel of an intercostal neuritis which may follow alcohol block can be largely avoided by thorough novocaine injection before and after the alcohol. This is a point of considerable importance which requires general confirmation. The discussion of slightly differing methods is perhaps unnecessarily full and might profitably have given place to fuller descriptions of the author’s own wide experience of the procedure. A useful table is included of the probable area of visceral and skeletal supply of various segments of the sympathetic chain; though the author admits that some of this is still in dispute.

The second part of the book contains a detailed description of the diagnostic and therapeutic uses of the method. One gains the impression at times that there is scarcely a pain, be it visceral or skeletal, that does not respond to this treatment, and it is therefore a little disconcerting to find that the author does not apparently insist on control of the accuracy of injection by skin temperature measurements or sweat reactions, such as are commonly used in clinics in this country. However, in certain cases other objective changes such as rise in gastric acidity, increase in urinary output, or improvement in electrocardiogram, add confirmation to the patient’s subjective report of reduction of pain. Such a report alone is an unsatisfactory criterion of physiological change, though it must often remain the chief yardstick of clinical cure when the disease itself is a complaint of pain from the patient.

The use of paravertebral block in angina pectoris is very fully discussed and the author certainly makes a case for its wide use. Successful abolition of paroxysmal tachycardia following stellate ganglion injection is also claimed. Cases of bronchial asthma which improve following sympathetic block are quoted. If such cases are confirmed after adequate control of a purely psychogenic effect, they may throw interesting light on possible cholinergic fibres in the thoracic sympathetic outflow.

The value of paravertebral block in conditions of vascular spasm of the extremities, both of veins and arteries, is stressed. But the author, in agreement with most other workers in this field, considers that the method is valueless in the treatment of hypertension or as a preliminary test for the effectiveness of later sympathetic surgery in that condition.

It will be of special interest to neurologists and neurosurgeons to read of this author’s successful treatment by paravertebral block of the very troublesome condition of post-herpetic neuralgia.

The treatment of painful disorders of the extremities is dealt with at some length. Under this heading are included painful phantom limbs, causalgia, and “reflex dystrophy of the extremities,” or what Livingston has termed “the post-traumatic pain syndrome.” In these cases, psychogenesis and physiogenesis are closely interwoven, and it behoves us to accept with caution the claims of physical therapy. Nevertheless, the author brings forward evidence that seems to substantiate his conclusion that paravertebral block may improve or even cure the condition.

In general, the book is a useful addition to the subject. The references are full and are brought up to date in an appendix. It should be of interest to neurologists and general physicians, who, as the author points out, are quite as capable of using this technique as their surgical colleagues. But it is written by an enthusiast, and should be read in a spirit of constructive criticism.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF A SCIENTIST
R. G. Gordon

This book is a sequel to one on “Personality” which the author wrote nearly twenty years ago, being an expansion of an earlier attempt to “attach some sort of meaning to the spiritual side of personality.” It is a discussion of the nature of the human soul in terms of “idea” rather than of “thing,” of value rather than of use. Dr. Gordon accepts the philosophy of emergence which sees mind and soul as higher qualities derived from and still dependent upon their material basis in the brain, and he believes with Alexander that Deity is also emerging as a “quality” which characterizes all that is best in man but which is only to be realized in the future through the progressive evolution of mankind.

Dr. Gordon’s book is thus agnostic, rationalist, and humanist in the not ignoble tradition that leads from the Stoics through Comte to Thomas Henry Huxley, Julian Huxley, and Bertrand Russell. But its humanity and culture and gentle idealism will leave many with
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some insistent questions still unanswered. Is this middle way between theism and atheism really the path of safety, or is it not rather a tightrope stretched across an abyss? Is there any logical alternative to design and chance as the causes of evolution? Does the present state of the world justify a belief in evolutionary progress, and, if there is no transcendent basis for ethics, by what standard is the humanist better than the gangster? Such questions are as old as mankind, and in these dark days we may be thankful for the light offered by humanism, even if it is unconscious of the source of the illumination which it reflects.

MODERN PSYCHIATRY IN PRACTICE
W. Lindsay Neustatter

The first edition of this individual and somewhat naïve book appeared eleven years ago. The author has changed the title from "Psychology" to "Psychiatry," since in 1937 he believed the latter term insufficiently known. Some additions and alterations have been made: thus there are new chapters on post-concussional states, physical methods in psychiatric treatment, and psychopathy (the last is dealt with in four pages). His classification of psychopathies is insufficient and his discussion of the problems superficial. The chapter on hysteria has been enlarged. The author believes dissociation to be the fundamental and essential disturbance in hysteria, but in view of its frequency in other conditions this view cannot be sustained. In his attitude to hysterical amnesia, Dr. Neustatter shows himself as sceptical as most psychiatrists with service experience. The chapter on affective disorders has also been amplified: the artificial and dangerous distinction between "psychotic" and "non-psychotic" depression has been dropped. The chapter on law has also been enlarged, and there is a note on the Bourne case. There is, as before, a chapter by Mr. Jack Jennings on vocational guidance.

Although it is easy to pick holes in this book, it has the merit of freshness and vigour, and the general practitioner—for whom it is largely intended—will derive a good deal of help from its pages, particularly those dealing with child psychiatry.

THE 1947 YEAR BOOK OF NEUROLOGY, PSYCHIATRY, AND NEUROSURGERY

This well-known publication is useful for the busy specialist, for it reminds him of many papers he has read and draws attention to others he has "missed." In this, the 1947 volume, there are nearly seven hundred pages of clearly written abstracts, while a full index of both subjects and authors makes for convenient reference.

PSYCHOTHERAPY: ITS USES AND LIMITATIONS
D. R. Allison and R. G. Gordon

It is not usual in any treatise on psychotherapy to read of contraindications to this method of treatment or any appreciation of the significance of physical factors in the production of mental symptoms. This introduction to psychotherapeutic practice is to be commended for having achieved a sensible and balanced presentation of the use of psychotherapy both in the purely neurotic patient and in those cases of psychosomatic disorder where bodily symptoms may be the sign of psychological disturbances. It will be appreciated by the general medical practitioner who is at present bewildered by the rival claims of different schools.