Book reviews


The Korean war found the United States unprepared for its early neurosurgical casualties and this remarkable volume reflects healthy self-criticism and a characteristically vigorous determination to learn thoroughly from experience, which Oscar Wilde defined better than anyone else as the name every one gives to their mistakes. Would we in Britain be any better prepared if this country were suddenly involved in serious fighting? The necessary fundamental information is available; indeed, it was recorded for future use during and at the end of World War II, and it must not be allowed to lie forgotten and to have to be wastefully rediscovered by a new surgical generation.

In his Foreword the Surgeon General suggests that the book will be of value also to the civilian medical profession; but, of course, the main theme is a far cry from head-injury work in a country where virtually no civilians carry arms. This is a book for warfare, and is presumably proving valuable in Vietnam at the moment.

It is therefore a pity that it has taken so long to appear, for it is not quite up to date; for example, the subject matter in a 1955 paper is described as 'recently reviewed'. The time lag leads inevitably to some important omissions. I should like to have seen the vexed problem of prophylactic antibiotics discussed and, from the U.S.A. particularly, to have read about something more sophisticated than the penicillin and streptomycin used in Korea, even if they may yet prove to be still the most useful drugs. In the chapters on spasticity, there is no mention of the use of phenol; in those on epilepsy, no reference to Jennett's work; and none to the anterior surgical approach in the chapter on cervical disc lesions. During World War II, some of the British neurosurgeons by whom I was trained remained unimpressed by the scrupulous attention that many American surgeons were paying to closure and grafting of torn dura mater, for there was no satisfactory evidence, nor has there been any since, that dural closure per se diminishes the incidence of either cerebrospinal fluid leakage or epilepsy. This controversy is acknowledged in the book, but if there is indeed no demonstrable difference in results between the two methods, there is surely a good case for the much shorter procedure (of simply excising contaminated dura) which will, during battle conditions, allow more operations in the precious time available. Similarly, the resection en bloc of a penetrating skull fracture is an unnecessary elaborate procedure if the dura is not to be widely exposed, excised, and repaired.

Neurosurgery can never be learned from pictures, but the 273 illustrations here are excellent: the photographs are clear and the drawings simple and instructive. The striking picture of the gloved finger feeling for the bone chip in a brain track would have horrified Dr. Cushing, but delighted Geoffrey Jefferson. We British surgeons would probably think that the plastic surgical methods, and especially the rotation flap taught to us by Sir Harold Gilleies, were more effective for closing large scalp defects than those illustrated here. Lesser criticisms may be made of the inevitable overlapping of subjects by different authors: and of a certain unevenness: for example, there is an excellent 25-page account of the rehabilitation of paraplegics, but very little about that of the brain-injured. In Figs. 193 and 194 the legends have been transposed, and the page reference at the foot of page 44, and also one of those in the index to the use of urea, are incorrect.

These criticisms are sincerely made by a devotee of simplified surgery whose own war-time experiences are recalled vividly from the experiences of a surgical neophyte, and they are offered with humility to any who may be having to do this horrid work again. Military surgeons cannot fail to be helped by this book, which is testimony chiefly to the work of Dr. Arnold M. Meirowsky, whose own modesty and readiness to acknowledge other possible techniques than his own are apparent. There are sections on military neurosurgery, craniocerebral trauma, trauma of spinal cord, spasticity from trauma, associated wounds, trauma of the intervertebral disk, and an excellent one, with clear testing charts and illustrations, on trauma of peripheral nerves. Dr. Meirowsky and his distinguished co-authors are to be congratulated, together with the U. S. Government whose subsidy must presumably be responsible for providing such a book at such a reasonable price.

JOHN POTTER


The ever increasing number of papers published each year makes the task of the editors of the Year Book tremendously difficult, if not impossible. Based, as the Year Book is, on summaries of articles, space does not permit more than a very limited number to be summarized which makes it hard to provide an adequate picture of progress in each field. The editors have tried to overcome this by adding references to other papers and comments in small print, but one wonders if a short review of a subject followed by summaries of the more important contributions might not be more satisfactory.


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