Book reviews


Psychosurgery is a physical treatment for mental illness, analogous to the surgical procedures used to control tremor and rigidity in Parkinson's disease. The theoretical justification for the use of physical treatments depends on the truth of the assumption that mental illness is due to a primary fault in the brain. Many people argue that mental illness is due to a maladaptive behaviour pattern, for which medication and physical treatment can never be appropriate. This volume The Psychosurgery Debate, is about the issues which arise from these conflicting viewpoints of mental illness. Dr Valenstein provides an excellent introduction to the volume made up from contributions of 20 separate authors. The views expressed are widely divergent and often incompatible with one another, and Dr Valenstein leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions.

The historical presentation of the development of psychosurgery does not lead one logically to the criteria for the selection of patients for contemporary operation, nor does it give any clear account of the evidence that psychiatric illness sometimes may have a physical cause. The chapters devoted to describing the people who receive psychosurgery and their selection does not enlighten one much further. This criticism may be too hard and obscure the very real difficulty of reaching agreed psychiatric diagnosis.

The work of the National Commission For the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research in their investigation of the effectiveness of psychosurgery in the United States, is described in detail and is an excellent presentation. This Commission whose name suggests that it was not an unbiased group, concluded to their surprise that psychosurgery is an effective treatment for certain disorders, and that they could not recommend Congress to prohibit this form of treatment. They came to this conclusion on a study of a group of patients, many of whom had been submitted to the older type of modified leucotomy rather than a modern stereotactic operation.

At an early stage in the history of psychosurgery, it was noted that lobotomy often produced a flattening of affect and drive. This undesirable effect offered a solution to the problem produced by antisocial and violent behaviour sometimes associated with mental illness. The development of the neuroleptics and effective medication for the treatment of mental illness in the early 1950s made resort to lobotomy unnecessary. However, some patients remained resistant to the newer treatments. A few surgeons have continued to operate, modifying and improving their techniques. As a result the place of psychosurgery in the treatment of depression and obsessive illness is now pretty well understood. The object is to restore health and no great ethical issues arise. On the other hand the correct use, if there is one, for psychosurgery in the management of violent antisocial behaviour, and on mentally sub-normal people, remains uncertain. The legal and ethical issues concerning the use of psychosurgery for the modification of antisocial behaviour, the prevention of violence, and on people confined to therapeutical institutions, are presented with evangelical zeal. The question “Can such people give informed and valid consent?” is a theme common to all contributors. The matter is of great importance when surgery is intended to alter the personality and behaviour. If a person through no fault of his own has a fault in the brain which produces violent and antisocial behaviour, should he be treated against his will, and if the treatment is effective is he not now a new person, and if sentenced for a crime should he not be promptly released? Has not any prisoner the right to seek treatment himself that might change him in such a way as to make it possible to live at peace with his fellows? These are the issues debated in a lively and entertaining way, as one would expect from Breggin and Hunter Brown.

The legal issues, including the setting-up and use of independent review committees are well discussed as a means of resolving the dilemmas which face the patient, his medical adviser and society. The states of California and Oregon set up legislation to this effect, and the Oregon experience of its operation is described. The question of establishing whether or not informed consent could be obtained, did not raise any problem. It proved much harder, particularly for the legal and lay members, to establish whether other treatments were appropriate or had been used and applied with sufficient diligence, and furthermore, whether or not a psychosurgical procedure was appropriate or actually worked. The simple cases quoted in this volume illustrate this point well enough. It is perhaps worth emphasis that the volume reflects American thinking on psychosurgery and of little relevance to contemporary practice in the United Kingdom, but that should not detract from the fact that it is the first serious attempt to bring all these issues together in one volume.

JOHN R BARTLETT

Pituitary Adenomas—Biology, Pathology and Treatment. Edited by PJ Derome, CP Jedynak, and F Pellanq (pp 348; FF268.00, $64.00) Paris: Librairie Luginbuhl, 1980.

This extremely expensive paperback comprises the proceedings of the second European Workshop on pituitary adenomas held in September 1979. Their contents are rather more informative than might be expected from a book of this type. As with the first Workshop Proceedings, the main emphasis is endocrinological, most of the material dealing with adenomas and micro-adenomas producing prolactin, growth hormone and ACTH. The role in treatment of external irradiation, radiosurgery with a Bragg peak proton beam, interstitial irradiation, trans-sphenoidal surgery, and, for prolactinomas, bromocriptine are discussed in separate contributions.

The comparison of results, especially between surgery and bromocriptine and of considerable interest to neurosurgery. Other papers which the reviewer found valuable were those on the CT diagnosis of micro-adenomas and the late rhinological complications of trans-sphenoidal operations. The book is well produced physically but contains many typographical errors, including a complete set of references lacking any year.