Book reviews


Voltaire's gibe about physicians who pour drugs of which they know little into bodies of which they know less is slightly less just today than it was two centuries ago, but few would claim it to be entirely undeserved. The Sage of Ferney would welcome this book. It comprises the proceedings of a symposium on Antiepileptic Drugs in Newborns, Infants, Children and Adolescents held in South Carolina in late 1981, with the assistance of the International League Against Epilepsy and a drug firm. The editors have done well to bring forth the book so quickly. The publisher's claim that the volume is the first single sourcebook available on the use of anticonvulsants in pediatric practice is, I think, correct, and, as such I welcome it too.

Thirty-four chapters by 32 contributors (13 from continental Europe and the United Kingdom and the rest from North America), are divided into seven sections. These are: General aspects, Pharmacokinetics, Differential Diagnosis and Clinical Efficacy of Drugs with Respect to Seizure Types, Effect of Antiepileptic Drugs on Psychosocial Development, Individualization of Drug Therapy, Current Problems in the Management of the Epilepsies, and Foundations for Future Research.

Chapters which I found valuable include those on Development of Physiological Variables Important for Drug Kinetics (Morrelli), and Drug Interactions in Epileptic Children (Levy et al), both good reviews of complex subjects. The first stresses the need to regard the neonate, infant and older child as quite different creatures in terms of drug kinetics with important therapeutic implications. The second considers the various processes of enzyme induction and inhibition, and changes in plasma protein binding which are known to occur with interactions between the principal anticonvulsants' drugs. It is useful to be reminded that enzyme induction may occur in utero in the case of newborns who show an increased ability to metabolise drugs acquired transplacentally. The interesting, and far from understood problem of carbamazepine and its 10,11-epoxide is referred to briefly in this chapter, but not, strangely, in the later chapter on 'How to use Carbamazepine'. The importance of the epoxide for side-effects and perhaps therapeutic effect would seem to deserve more discussion.

In the nine chapters on how to use individual drugs it is inevitable that the reader should disagree with some of the statements made, and that some authors should disagree with others. Generalisations about paediatric therapy are often misleading and it is encouraging to find a discussant (some of the most helpful parts of the book are in the reported discussions) pointing out that drug interactions can vary from one patient to another and cannot be predicted, and that individuals may have their own 'therapeutic ranges'. Most of the authors take a reasonably optimistic view of the rarity of severe hepatotoxic side-effects from valproate (the drug is mainly discussed as valproic acid and the enteric-coated preparations were not yet widely available in the United States at the time of the meeting). As always, one is struck by how much better some things are done in the United States than elsewhere; compliance about medication in the classroom is assured in one system with the help of an educational consultant who liaises with the patient's teacher. Those who have come up against the negative attitudes of some British teachers to drugs will feel envy at such a system.

The chapters on 'How to use' particular drugs are useful and detailed guides, based on wide experience of managing patients and of the controversies and uncertainties that still abound. In addition to the conventional anticonvulsants, steroids and the ketogenic diet are also discussed and, rather surprisingly, bromides. When help is slow in coming in the shape of effective new drugs for intractable epilepsy, it is perhaps not unreasonable to draw on the experience of the past.

The reader will learn much from this book. At times he will find himself anxiously asking whether he should be attempting some of the investigations mentioned; whether, for example, he should try to distinguish between fast and slow metabolisers of phenytoin, as described by Albani, by measuring the phenytoin index before starting the drug. He will probably, if practising in Britain under the limitations existing in laboratory facilities in many areas, decide that he should not. Impressed by the logic of measuring 'trough' levels drugs, he will worry about how to achieve this in outpatients; it may require an overnight admission which he would rather avoid. He will be concerned to learn, from a comment by Morrelli in the discussion on valproate, that the trough levels of this drug have been shown to occur not in the morning, but in the afternoon with the enteric-coated preparation which is now virtually the only solid preparation available in this country. He will be intrigued by Dr Penry's reference to the protocol that 'called for a cold-turkeying of ethosuximide' and is wondering why it is not being tried in the UK.

This is a valuable, instructive and stimulating book. The reader will not necessarily agree with all the opinions expressed in it, but he will find it very helpful in his management of childhood epilepsy and should secure a copy for himself, or at least his library.

EM BRETT


I have enjoyed reading this book and the editor should be congratulated for securing the collaboration of such a distinguished group of writers. The book is divided into two parts. The first deals with history and concepts and includes contributions, already previously published, by Henri Ey, Aubrey Lewis, Eliot Slater and RE Kendall. The second part is devoted to the clinical presentation and management, and here the trans-Atlantic contribution is more evident. In particular, chapters are devoted to the St Louis' or Briquet's syndrome and to the DSM-III criteria.

It is difficult to avoid repetition and to achieve a homogeneous quality in a multi-author book such as this, but the overall standard is good and the ground covered is extensive. Apart from the classic already published papers, I specially enjoyed the chapter by the late James Shields on the genetics of hysterical disorders, hystera presented to the neurologists by J Pincus, the hysterical alteration of consciousness by GW Fenton, and the hysterical mechanisms and pain and management of hystereia by H Merskey and M Sim respectively.

"Hysteria", according to Aubrey Lewis, is a tough old word which has survived many a death sentence; it has also defeated countless attempts to understand its mechanisms or to achieve a satisfactory classification. It has, however, produced a wealth of research and has attracted the interest of many distinguished psychiatrists. This book provides a good perspective of the state of the art and it will be useful reading for psychiatrists and physicians alike.

MARIA RON"