Book reviews


With a volume uncompromisingly entitled "Brain Peptides" one expects something of textbook status. While the size is certainly substantial the book is, however, essentially a compendium of facts, a rather predictable collection of chapters written by a large number of different authors and which in many cases are to be found in other volumes. This is perhaps not surprising at present as we have only very vague ideas concerning the mode of action and function of brain peptides and any clinical relevance for the majority of these substances is far from clear. The discovery almost ten years ago of the enkephalins has not been followed by the development of more effective or less addictive analgesics. Similarly the treatment of basal ganglia disease has not been revolutionised by the knowledge that the levels of peptides such as substance P, enkephalin and cholecystokinin can be radically altered in diseased states.

The popular success of peptide research is to a large part due to the introduction of a number of immunological and molecular biological techniques which are fast becoming standard laboratory tools in the search for more and more peptides. This book acknowledges the importance of technical innovation by setting aside one of its four sections (of five chapters) for the description of the various methodologies. These include receptor binding, immunocytochemistry, neuroanatomical techniques, electrophysiology and second messenger systems. These chapters are not step by step accounts of how to perform various techniques. Rather they are critical assessments coupled with a brief description of the different ways the methodologies have been used. There was here a noticeable exception in the omission of any mention of the peptide stimulated hydrolysis of inositol phospholipids which may well play a critical intracellular role in many neuronal (and non-neuronal) cells.

The first sections of the book deal with the currently fashionable molecular biological aspects of brain peptides. An introductory chapter by the editors is followed by chapters on the evolution, molecular biology, synthesis, and degradation of peptides as well as certain aspects of the development of peptidergic neurons and their presence in various invertebrate phyla. The second section attempts to assess the role of peptides in particular functions. It is undoubtedly the most controversial area, particularly in the psychiatric field and in the general area of memory research. Other chapters cover feeding, glucoregulation, thermoregulation, nociception, salt and water regulation and various aspects of reproduction. A chapter on retinal neuropeptides is also included. The final section takes a number of the more popular peptides and devotes a chapter to each. Old favourites such as oxytocin vasopressin and substance P and the enkephalins are joined by scholarly chapters on the cholecystokinin, bombesin and corticotropin releasing factor although almost as a justification of continual reference to a "rapidly expanding" field there are the notable omissions of the recently described pancreatic polypeptides and calcitonin related peptides. The section is completed by chapters on somatostatin, insulin, vasoactive intestinal polypeptide, LHRH and GHRH.

Overall this is a passable standard work on peptides. Obviously some chapters are more concisely and clearly written than others but the editors have provided at least a veneer of continuity to a vast number of disparate chapters. How well the book will survive the rapid advance of peptide research is, of course, a limiting factor, as is the enormous cost of the volume. Presumably the publishers assumed that for the price of ten milligrams of substance P a thousand pages on peptides was very good value indeed.

**STEPHEN P HUNT**

**Treatment of the DSM-III Psychiatric Disorders.** By William H Reid, George U Balis and John Y Donaldson. (Pp 192; £34.00.) New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1983.

As its title suggests, this book is an approach to psychiatric treatment based on the categories of the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association*. The success of the authors in their tasks depends to a large extent on the validity of their approach. Is DSM III a reasonable basis for treatments; can psychiatric treatments be designed from a consideration of diagnosis alone: can such information be appropriately applied in the management of psychiatric cases by likely readers of the book? The short answer to each of these questions is No! DSM III was designed more for epidemiological research and for heuristic reasons than as a guide to treatments; it is simply the latest of a series of attempts to classify psychiatric disturbances, and is not yet based on a sound conceptual understanding of the nature of psychiatric disorder. Diagnosis in psychiatric disorder may be a guide to treatment, but does not allow for the individual design of treatment programmes which is necessary, and which must be based on the circumstances of the individual case. Possibly the most misleading aspect of the book is that it adopts a "cookery book" approach to a series of disorders which can only be handled by practitioners who are thoroughly versed in the methods of clinical psychiatry. Individuals of such experience would find the book banal in its simplistic approach. The less experienced would have insufficient knowledge of assessment and diagnosis to put it into practice. Viewed in this way the task the authors have set themselves is just not sensible.

Within these important reservations the book is well produced, well documented and gives useful references to the citations on psychiatric treatment. Unfortunately most British psychiatrists will find this book quite incompatible with clinical methods in the UK. In my view, such an approach to treatment is simply not valid and the book cannot be recommended to any group and is especially unsuitable for medical students.

RHS MINDHAM


This multiauthor book is the 25th volume of the Aging Series since publication started in 1975. The topic is of considerable interest as the numbers of alcoholics and elderly subjects in our society are on the increase and new problems are likely to arise from the interaction of alcohol abuse and aging. However, the available knowledge is so limited that the choice of topic appears premature, unless the aim of the book was to highlight our ignorance.

The book is divided into three parts, dealing with sociology, biology and biochemistry, and diagnosis and treatment. A final chapter deals with future directions for research in the field. The best part, in my opinion, is the one concerning the biological and biochemical aspects, in which at least the experimental work goes