Notes and activities

A Visit to China
We spent two fascinating weeks in China in October 1978, on a study and lecture tour under the auspices of the British Council and the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences. Our visit appeared to be the first by Western doctors with a special interest in gastroenterology for many years, and there was much to discuss.* We were impressed by the enormous size and population of the country, but also by a general spirit of confidence in solving its problems. Over everything hung the legacy of the cultural revolution and the ‘gang of four’. Academic activity was actively discriminated against between 1966 and 1976; medical and nursing education had virtually ceased, and a whole generation of health care workers was missing from hospitals. Many professors and their departments had been disbanded and there were no young doctors to replace them.

The spectrum of gastrointestinal disease did not appear so different from that in Britain. Functional bowel disease, ulcers, and gallstones were common; there was more infective and parasitic disease, and little evidence of Crohn’s disease or ulcerative colitis. Schistosomiasis, hepatitis, and primary liver cancer were major problems. The large regional variations in the incidence of gastrointestinal cancers were documented in impressive detail. There were central co-ordinating committees for oesophageal cancer, gastric cancer, colorectal cancer, and primary liver cancer—-with field teams based in the high risk areas attempting early detection and prevention. We were struck by the apparent association between schistosomiasis and colorectal cancer, by analogy with ulcerative colitis.

We visited major institutions in Canton, Peking, Shanghai, and Hangchow. The fabric of the hospitals was old and there were no disposable materials; we saw new equipment being installed. Barium studies were mainly single contrast; Japanese and Chinese-made endoscopes were used extensively in a few hospitals. The cultural revolution had discouraged pathologists and biopsy procedures as being effete and irrelevant; the techniques of laparoscopy, liver biopsy, jejunal biopsy, and even necropsy had been discarded; interest is fast returning.

There were limited opportunities for postgraduate study and access to medical literature; reprints and books were especially welcome. There are plans for a national organisation in gastroenterology, which will facilitate exchanges with overseas specialists. We hope that a small group of Chinese gastroenterologists will visit Britain in the autumn of 1980.

B C MORSON, P B COTTON

*Several of our hosts spoke warmly of a previous visit by Sir Francis Avery Jones, in 1936, and one spoke nostalgically about studying in London in the 1920s with Sir Arthur Hurst.

Books


Pancreatic disease is becoming increasingly common throughout the Western world, yet diagnostic techniques, though greatly improved, are still inconclusive and treatment has advanced little. This book, which is the result of Anglo-French collaboration and is published simultaneously in both languages, reviews our knowledge of the pancreas to date. The editors have both been involved in the study of the pancreas for many years and have brought together a group of contributors who can write authoritatively on their particular aspect of the pancreas and its diseases. In each of the three parts, covering the normal pancreas, investigation of pancreatic disease and diseases of the pancreas, the chapters are excellent, readable, and up-to-date with reviews of extensive references up to early 1979. Contributors have taken an eclectic approach and presented the opposing views where there is conflict of opinion. Clinicians will be particularly interested in the second and third parts. Pancreatic function testing and the great advances in imaging techniques are very well reviewed, though the ultrasound pictures may not impress non-ultrasonologists and the inverted ‘short route’ ERCP picture may confuse endoscopists. Pancreatic diseases are comprehensively covered, including summaries of the ineffectiveness of so much of our present treatment, both medical and surgical.

At a time when the diagnosis and treatment of pancreatic disease are beginning to make progress, this book is a comprehensive, erudite, and timely review of the state of our present knowledge. It will inevitably be the standard reference text for all who are fascinated by this elusive organ.

RODNEY H TAYLOR

Developments in Digestive Diseases, 2

The increasing number of annual review publications reflects the very rapid advances in clinical and experimental gastroenterology. This volume is the second in a planned annual series in this field. A wide selection of different topics has been chosen for this volume, most of them having direct clinical relevance.

An excellent review of serum pepsinogens is given by Mike Samloff, foremost in research in this field for over a decade. Clinical relevance has only recently become apparent, with the demonstration that serum pepsinogen I level is apparently inherited as an autosomal dominant trait, serving as a subclinical marker of duodenal ulcer diathesis in certain families. Other subgroups of patients with duodenal ulcer disease are being delineated by combined measurements of serum pepsinogens and gastrin, suggesting that research in this field will give additional insight into normal and abnormal gastric function.

Cimetidine and its uses are covered in detail by James Freston. This also is a topical and useful chapter, but might have been improved with some conclusion or observation as to how one should use the drug in duodenal ulcer patients in the long term and how, now that cimetidine is available, to select patients with ulcers who would benefit by surgical treatment.

Fibre and the gastrointestinal tract is covered by Mendoloff who gives a useful summary of previous studies. The difference between simple addition of fibre to a refined diet and the eating of a completely unrefined diet is not discussed in any detail, but, overall, this chapter gives an excellent background and review of the subject.

The only purely research paper is by Warren L. Beeken on infectious agents in inflammatory bowel disease, and this gives a rather sobering view of the lack of progress in this tantalising area.

There are several chapters on techniques which may, or may not, prove in time to be suitable for widespread clinical use. These include the peritoneojugular shunt for the treatment of ascites by LeVeen and Wapnick and percutaneous fine-needle aspiration biopsy of the pancreas by Michael Grossman. Both of these are competent and authoritative reviews. In adjacent chapters Joachim Burhenne and Peter Cotton are courteously co-
petitive in their recommendations as to the non-operative management of biliary tract stones by extraction through the T tube tract or by duodenoscopic sphincterotomy, respectively. Both contributions are nicely written and illustrated, with Peter Cotton perhaps winning on points by the inclusion of colour photographs. As always, one is left feeling that perhaps it is the enthusiasm and skill of the doctor rather than the technique itself that is important in determining the outcome of treatment.

The subjects covered by Bill Go and David Dreiling and Philip Wolfson (oncofetal antigens and the secretin test, respectively) appear perhaps a little dated, but, as both chapters are written with the style which would be expected from such authorities, these also are good value.

Finally, there is an excellent chapter on current concepts of screening, diagnosis, and risk of colonic cancer by Winawer, Poleski, and Sherlock.

Dr. Berk has maintained the high standard set by the first volume of his 'Developments in Digestive Diseases'. This book can be recommended to all gastroenterologists, and the series seems set to hold its own against the competition of the other gastroenterology reviews.

RICHARD F. HARVEY


During the last 15 years, research workers and clinicians have become interested in the biology and clinical application of a range of oncofetal products. These two volumes provide a collection of up-to-date information arising from the 6th Meeting of the International Research Group for Carcinoma-embryonic Proteins held in Marburg in September 1978.

Both volumes are arranged in chapters covering carcinoembryonic antigen and other carcinoembryonic proteins, alpha-fetoprotein, isoferritin, placental proteins, isoenzymes, and hormones. Volume I consists of invited reviews and the more important original papers. Volume 2 comprises the remaining original papers covering a spectrum of interest from basic sciences to clinical applications.

Current research and opinion about the clinical usefulness of tumour markers will be of particular interest to the gastroenterologist. There are some useful contributions about the biology and clinical applications of AFP in benign and malignant liver diseases. Several papers highlight the problems of specificity and sensitivity in the use of CEA in diagnosis. Its usefulness in post-operative monitoring, and some preliminary results of second look operations undertaken because of rising CEA values, are discussed. The value of measuring more than one tumour marker is touched on. Several authors conclude that the interest in and potential application of tumour markers at present outstrip their proven clinical usefulness in some areas.

Volume I is a useful reference work for those interested in recent developments in oncofetal products, and both volumes provide detailed information for the research worker, and an excellent source of references to the literature. In spite of extensive selection and editing, there is inevitably some variability in the quality of contributions and, in view of the price, it is likely that copies will be purchased by libraries rather than individuals.

ALICE W BULLEN


Abdominal pain is one of the commonest reasons for which patients consult a gastroenterologist. Its investigation and management probably cause more difficulty than any other specific symptom. It was with pleasure therefore that I received this book, which seemed to offer help in a difficult area.

Regrettably, however, I have to report that this has not proved to be the case. The main problem seems to be that the author has failed to define for whom this book is written and what it is trying to do. My impression is that it has been written from the point of view of a junior medical student rather than that of an experienced clinician. If this is the case, then I feel that the book contains an excessive amount of detail and that the text is very repetitive. It is unfortunate that the author has chosen to follow very traditional lines in the layout of the book with chapters devoted to history taking, physical examination, anatomy, physiology, etc., rather than attempting to approach abdominal pain from a symptomatic point of view and an analysis of how one sorts out these symptoms. Because of this approach, the text is very discursive and repetitive and, unfortunately, there are few illustrations present to break up the monotony of the written word. In discussing the causes of abdominal pain the author has decided to do this under 'organ headings' rather than under 'pain patterns'. The latter would, perhaps, have been more helpful to the student and practising clinician. At one point in the text mention is made of the value of 'probability analysis' in the diagnosis of abdominal pain. However, in spite of this, throughout the text the author repeats dogmatically features which such probability analysis has shown to be in error. The one redeeming feature is that there is a bibliography after every chapter which could be of considerable value for anyone interested in this topic.

In conclusion, therefore, I feel that I cannot recommend this book, except as an excellent source of references.

C W VENABLES


This book presents the proceedings of a symposium on surgical sepsis held in Birmingham in September 1978. The national and international organisers were able to bring together a number of distinguished contributors all of whom have established a reputation in the field. None of the individual contributions can be faulted; all are based on careful documented observation and sound clinical experience, and the presentation is uniformly good. There are concise reviews of the basis of prophylaxis and treatment of infection, and a series of papers on systemic protection are devoted to common problems in gastrointestinal surgery.

While there is little to criticise in terms of content and presentation, it is difficult to recommend purchase of this volume. The book is one of a number of recent reviews, small textbooks, and published conference proceedings which address the problem of surgical infection, and, as such, has no particular merit. The clinician seeking clear guidelines will be disappointed, in that the participants had no common view on the prevention and treatment of sepsis in gastrointestinal surgery, their views reflecting the spectrum of informed opinion in the current surgical literature. Clinicians with a particular interest in surgical sepsis may enjoy a browse through this volume, but one suspects that they will already be aware of the material presented.