

BOOK REVIEWS

Skin Diseases in General Practice. By F. Ray Bettley, T.D., M.D., F.R.C.P. London: 1949. Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode Ltd. (for *The Practitioner*). Pp. 260. 96 illustrations. Price 21s. net.

The diagnosis and treatment of diseases of the skin often present obscure problems to the medical profession not engaged in the practice of dermatology. Many find it difficult to understand the reason for this, for visible lesions would be expected to lend themselves to easy diagnosis, and treatment should consequently be a routine matter. But even a simple-looking lesion may react to treatment in a bizarre manner, thereby undermining the confidence of practitioners called upon to treat skin diseases.

It is not uncommon to meet the opinion that either a skin condition will be benefited by calamine lotion, or it will prove resistant to any treatment. Because of lack of facilities for consultation with specialists, skin affections have often been neglected and have been allowed to become chronic. Perhaps the reason for this state of affairs has been a tendency to regard the skin as a separate entity; a covering subject to local reactions which call only for local treatment. Even now there is a reluctance on the part of the profession to recognize the importance of the constitutional factors that are related to practically every skin disease, and to forget that the skin is not only the largest organ of the body, but also an active organ responsible for certain essential functions and intimately related to other systems in the body.

The problem of dermatology is not a simple subject which can be summarily dismissed, for the state of the skin is in some respects an index to that of the whole body; therefore a considerable knowledge of general medicine is essential to the proper practice of dermatology. To the busy practitioner, in these days of rapidly developing medical knowledge, this aspect of the problem creates a special difficulty in the management of skin diseases. It is because it recognizes these basic problems and the need for a practical work on dermatology that this new book is particularly valuable.

The author has found in his practice of the specialty that four-fifths of his work is concerned with ten or a dozen common diagnoses and that the remainder is made up of hundreds of uncommon or rare diseases which will usually require specialist advice. He therefore argues that a thorough consideration of the characteristics and treatment of the dozen common conditions, and the exclusion of the more rare diseases, will give the practitioner a better working knowledge of dermatology; this will cover all but 10 per cent. of the skin conditions that he is likely to encounter, and, at the same time will help him to recognize the rare conditions by exclusion, so that he can refer them to a specialist at an early stage for appropriate advice.

"Skin Diseases in General Practice" is not a book of reference; the subject matter is intentionally limited, and a detailed account is given of a few common conditions. It will be widely appreciated and should do much to improve the practitioner's approach to the patient with skin disease.

The book is artistically produced and well illustrated with pictures that clearly indicate the salient points referred to in the text. There are general maxims drawing attention to the importance of the morphology of the lesion and methods of examination. Great stress is rightly laid on the value of obtaining a complete history of the onset and development of the eruption. The common diseases are then considered in separate chapters, in very much more detail than has been customary in previous works of this type; many conditions are illustrated by case histories. Differential diagnoses sometimes refer to conditions, such as lichen planus and dermatitis herpetiformis, which are not described in the text, but it is difficult to see how this could have been avoided under the circumstances.

Among dermatologists there are many different views about terminology and about the aetiology of even common skin diseases. Although these opposing views are often mentioned briefly, the text may sometimes cause confusion to those who have acquired an elementary knowledge in another school.

Eczema is described as an entity in contrast to the non-specific reaction of dermatitis. If this classification were widely accepted, it would help to avoid confusion and in time would possibly lessen the public's dread of a diagnosis of "dermatitis." The author favours the view that eczema is due to contact; but dermatitis venanata or allergic dermatitis might be considered more convenient terms for such a reaction, and in fact he refers to this group in a later chapter under the title "occupational dermatoses." Even in the separate chapter on constitutional eczema, he appears to consider a simple constitutional aetiology unlikely, and he believes there is an internal cause with external precipitating factors. This view will not be universally accepted, and some reference to opposing views might with advantage have been briefly mentioned in the introduction.

In dealing with infantile eczema the author fails to convey the importance of psychological factors and the undoubted value of proper child management, which can often be achieved only with the help of an efficient child guidance clinic. The unreliability of skin tests in this condition is stressed, but many will have found that eggs and the fat of cow's milk, rather than cow's milk itself, are more important food factors than the author indicates. His claim that infantile eczema tends to regress by the age of two years, as well as his suggestion that Besnier's flexural eczema prurigo does not usually supersede the condition before the age of seven, will be challenged. With regard to temperament in the flexural eczema group there is no clear opinion, and we are again faced with the problem of the egg and the chick. The problem is possibly psychosomatic and related to environment and management, but the mental attitude of these patients is undoubtedly a precipitating factor. If it is possible to adjust the introspective egocentric personality (as in marriage), the response to treatment can be dramatic and out of all proportion to the mental improvement following the relief of symptoms.

There is an interesting classification of occupational dermatitis which will be of value in the early diagnosis of these conditions and should minimize chronic allergic states and shorten the period of incapacity. The relation of this condition to subsequent eczematoid reactions due to other causes is stressed.

Seborrhœic states are also clearly described, but the importance of acidosis and high carbohydrate diets are not adequately stressed, while the psychological factors associated with these problems might have had greater consideration.

The treatment advocated for psoriasis is rather drastic. Chrysarobin is less favoured in modern therapy than the text suggests, and a warning about the dangers of prolonged arsenical medication is omitted.

It would be fairer to warn against prolonged medication with sulphonamides and penicillin in the treatment of impetigo than to say that it is not justifiable to use them for treatment when other effective remedies are available.

In the section dealing with ringworm of the scalp no mention is made of the penetrating bases, such as carbol wax 1500; nor are the newer fatty acid derivatives mentioned in the treatment of other fungus infections.

In an excellent chapter on birthmarks, detailed treatment of strawberry nævi should have included reference to the spontaneous disappearance of many of these marks without treatment and with a correspondingly lessened risk of permanent disfiguring scars. The advice to leave pigmented moles untreated in childhood, though the risk of malignancy from trauma in adult life is admitted, is unacceptable.

Finally there is a long list of the common sensitizing compounds capable of causing dermatitis, with the appropriate concentration and vehicles used for patch testing; this valuable table will probably be of little help to the harassed practitioner for whom the book is really intended, but it is nevertheless a useful addition to the book.

Beyond these minor criticisms, the book is excellent. It gives in an easy and readable style just the amount of information which will help the practitioner to solve many of his difficulties with skin cases. It could do much to overcome the indifference which has for so long been responsible for the plight of the unfortunate and sometimes neglected patient with skin disease.

D. E.

Aids to the Nursing of Venereal Diseases. By E. M. Ryle-Horwood, S.R.N. 1949. London: Baillière, Tindall, and Cox. Pp. 132. 35 illustrations. Price 5s.

Sooner or later during training every nurse in a medical ward meets with a case of venereal disease, often one that is already far advanced, or perhaps an expectant mother with the disease in its latent stage; or she may come across a case of early venereal disease in a casualty department. Although some knowledge is thus gained, the nurse in training has little opportunity of acquiring a comprehensive picture of the natural course of these

diseases unless she spends part of her training working in a venereal disease clinic. Medical textbooks are usually far too full of detail to be of value, and they contain little or no instruction about nursing.

This small volume contains an admirable short account of the course, methods of investigation, and modern treatment of these diseases. Constructed from the daily work of a busy venereal disease clinic, it approaches the problems involved from a practical and instructive angle which includes the medical, nursing, social, public health, and confidential aspects. The work is clear and concise, well balanced, and notably free from errors. There is some confusion in the description of congenital syphilis, where the paragraph outlining the late manifestations is sub-titled "Early Congenital Syphilis" and a description of the early lesions is missing.

The book can safely be recommended as being accurate and helpful to the nurse in training. It is written, however, almost exclusively from the point of view of and for the benefit of the female nurse; and to render it of equal value to the male nurse some details of the procedure of urethral irrigation, preparation for urethroscopy, care and maintenance of urethral bougies, and the local treatment of such conditions as balanitis, soft sore, bubo, epididymitis, and prostaticitis might be included.

V. E. L.

The Shadow on the Path. By George Bankoff, M.D., F.R.C.S. 1949. London: Peter Garnett. Pp. 205. Price 12s. 6d.

The reader is introduced to an imaginary venereologist who recounts a series of case histories to illustrate various aspects of gonorrhœa and syphilis. In the final chapter the general problem of the venereal diseases is considered and notification and compulsory treatment of all cases, together with factual education of the public at large, are advocated as the solution. It is fortunate that the venereologist is fictitious, as his technical knowledge leaves much to be desired. He leans heavily on the results of laboratory tests and has a touching faith in the power of penicillin to work miracles. The case histories are told dramatically and literary licence frequently distorts factual accuracy. Space does not permit a catalogue of the many technical errors, but few if any venereologists will agree with the remarks to be found on pages 56 (lines 25 to 28), 73 (lines 20 to 24), 80, 81 (lines 2 to 5), 94 (lines 9 and 10), 184 (lines 20 to 22). Serious typographical errors occur on pages 95 and 107. In the chapters entitled "Father and Son" and "Phyllis," technical inaccuracies and confused medical thought are especially prominent. The serious technical errors make this book unsuitable for medical students (to whom the author hopes it will be useful); and the lay reader, whilst perhaps enjoying the dramatic story, must seek elsewhere for sound factual knowledge of the venereal diseases.

S. M. L.

Owing to the steadily increasing cost of production, it has been found necessary to raise the price of the *British Journal of Venereal Diseases*, beginning with the first issue of 1950. The yearly subscription will then be 30s. (U.S.A. \$5). Single copies remain at 7s. 6d. each.