Syphilis and the elderly

Dr B Chattopadhay1 reports a case of a 91-year-old man found to have positive serological tests for syphilis prior to emigration. He states the difficulties encountered in accurate diagnosis.

Two geriatricians, a psychiatrist and myself2 in 1987 reviewed 659 consecutive medical and psychiatric admissions in the elderly to St James’s Hospital, Leeds, where standard serological tests for syphilis were performed.

The ages ranged between 65 and 103 years (mean 81); 210 were men; 449 were women. Positive serological tests for syphilis were found in 23 (3·5%) of the patients, whose ages ranged from 69 to 93 (mean 82-5). Seventeen were women and six were men. Even after extensive investigation 11 (1·7%) could only be diagnosed as latent syphilis.

We were helped in diagnosis in that all the patients were white and a confidential venereal diseases treatment register exists in Leeds going back to 1919 in which we were able to check previous diagnoses.


This monograph contains the documentation of The International Symposium on Genital Papillomavirus Infection held in Hamburg in 1989. It covers epidemiology, molecular biology, diagnosis, clinical aspects, immunological aspects, and therapy. The sixty-two contributors from ten countries are drawn from a wide range of specialities which deal with papillomavirus infection and the sequelae of such infection.

The sections on molecular biology and diagnosis are especially well presented. The authors ease the uninitiated painlessly into the world of papillomavirus biology.

The 11 chapters on clinical aspects economically cover a wide subject matter, and are generally well written. Illustrations, particularly the photomicrographs of cervical cytology were of a high quality. My only criticisms of this section concerned the DNA histograms which required further explanation for them to make their full impact, and that the chapter on vulval dystrophies seemed to be misplaced in this book, as papillomavirus is not mentioned at all.

The chapter entitled Immunology of Genital Papillomavirus Infections eloquently reviews humoral immunity, cell-mediated immunity, cell-mediated cytotoxicity and local immune mechanisms. In a concise summary the relative importance of these individual components of the immune response to H.P.V., and the implications on future development of therapies is discussed.

I was a little disappointed not to find any information concerning loop excision diathermy in the section concerning therapy, although at the time of this conference this modality of treatment was just emerging. My disappointment was off-set by chapters on the basic science of cryotherapy and laser therapy.

Overall this book is well written and presented. It is not for the molecular biologist, but for the clinician with an interest in papillomavirus infection.