

Hunter's diseases of occupations. Edited by P A B Raffle, W R Lee, R I McCallum, R Murray. (£95.00.) London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987.

Anyone who has been given the task of writing an account of occupational medicine, as opposed to a special interest within the field, will know the daunting task that faced the editors of this new textbook. The specialty is so broad that it covers most aspects of medicine with a range beyond the grasp of any one individual and seemingly without defined limits. What is specific to occupational medicine compared with so called general medicine or other medical specialties? Is the occupational physician, as Donald Hunter was, a general physician with an interest in diseases with identifiable causes in the workplace? Or has the identity been altered by the same social and technological changes that have made a rewrite of Donald Hunter's classic textbook necessary since its last edition was published in 1978? Troublesome as these questions undoubtedly are they cannot be ignored by editor and reviewer alike.

The present book is entirely new apart from the first three chapters on historical aspects which have been reprinted without major change from the original. The other chapters are well written by an array of authoritative contributors. The preface states that the principal readership is intended to be clinicians seeking guidance over the investigation and diagnosis of possible occupational disease as well as specialists in occupational health and trainees. The book, however, is neither a complete account of clinical occupational medicine nor a comprehensive source of reference on occupational health practice and is therefore unlikely fully to meet their needs. The busy clinician will want to refer rapidly to the different causes of a suspect occupational disorder but the format does not readily lend itself to this approach. For example, there is no adequate discussion of the diagnosis of such standard clinical conditions as toxic hepatitis or peripheral neuropathy, or their pathology. Descriptions of the aspects of working practices which place the patient at greater risk are sparse, so that the non-specialist may be unable to decide on the basis of the patient's history if the job poses a hazard or not.

Although occupational diseases are today much less common than formerly, at least in developed countries, health hazards abound as a visit to any group of small workplaces will show. That we in Britain still have no good idea of the extent of the health problems in most workplaces shows the persisting shortfall in the provision of occupational health services that continues to frustrate professionals and which should be a challenge to governments to redress. Nevertheless, most occupational medicine practice today lies in the evaluation and management of workplace hazards well in advance of the emergence of frank disease. The essential task of health risk assessment requires much more than the application of clinical skills and making a diagnosis, though in some organisations misunderstanding of the physician's role and economic strains

have threatened to pass the task over to others in the health and safety team. Indeed, in small companies the part time physician, if there is one at all, may have little idea that his role should be anything more than a traditional clinical one.

The scope of occupational medicine today is therefore much wider than this volume would suggest to the non-specialist reader. The modern clinician has to use a knowledge of epidemiology, occupational hygiene, toxicology, biological monitoring, exposure limits, and health and safety legislation, as well as more specialised subjects depending on the industry, in the process of risk assessment and deciding on appropriate health monitoring. Only passing attention is given to any of these issues or the effect of health on work and rehabilitation.

Instead of reproducing Hunter's chapters, a new account of the decline of the traditional occupational diseases would have been welcome. The reasons for the remarkable advances in the prevention of occupational diseases over the past century are complex and fascinating, and a modern historical analysis is now needed in this time of rapid technological change when the roles of professionals and government in the provision of occupational health services are under scrutiny. Other chapters cover the traditional subjects: metals, aromatic and aliphatic compounds, gases, noise and vibration, cold and heat, increased and reduced barometric pressure, ionising and non-ionising radiation, inorganic dusts, infectious agents, and reproduction. Newer topics are extremely low frequency electromagnetic fields and biotechnology. Certain occupational disorders are accorded chapters of their own: repetition strain injury, byssinosis, extrinsic allergic alveolitis, asthma, cancer, and disease of the skin. Despite their growing importance the subjects of stress and health promotion are omitted. The most successful chapters are those that give clear guidance on diagnosis and medical supervision, while less satisfactory are those which, in attempting to give wide coverage of their fields, may be found by many, particularly students, to be too discursive on common or important problems.

There was a time when Hunter was virtually the only standard textbook on occupational medicine available, but in the past decade numerous general and specialised works on occupational health have appeared on both sides of the Atlantic. The new Hunter will be seen as a useful reference book to add to these. The student should not, however, believe that possession of the new book removes an obligation to read the classic original, which remains an enthralling historical record of occupational diseases and their prevention.

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Correction

Work and pregnancy (September 1988)

References 27 and 28 should read *British Medical Journal*.