BOOK REVIEW

A Colour Atlas of Poisonous Plants

By DIETRICH FROHNE & HANS JÜRGEN PFÄNDER

Wolfe Publishing Ltd, London. 1984. 291pp. £30.00.

There is often great anxiety when a child or adult is thought to have eaten a poisonous plant, but in Britain serious poisoning by plants is very rare. Indeed, in many cases of suspected plant poisoning no toxic effects occur at all and no treatment is required. Often the identity of a plant is known but information is needed about its possible toxicity and any necessary treatment. Sometimes, however, only a vague description and fragments of material are available for identification. This book is intended to help with these problems. It covers European wild plants and garden and house plants, but not mushrooms or fungi. It is a beautiful 'coffee-table' book, with many colour and monochrome photographs of plants, their berries and leaves. However, it is much more than an atlas, for there is a detailed, indeed exhaustive, text and over 800 references. The authors (from the Institute for Pharmaceutical Biology at Kiel) have reviewed the literature on poisonous plants critically and quote it at length. For many plants generally regarded as dangerous the evidence of toxicity is very vague. For plants which really are poisonous the data given on toxic quantities and effects could occasionally be very useful. Few people will need to know the molecular structure of plant toxins or the microscopic appearances of the pericarps of plants, but the details are here.

The authors' advice on treatment is short and is the weakest section of the book; presumably they do not look after patients. Much of the advice is reasonable but there are unfortunate lapses and some of the recommendations are dangerous. Salt-water emetics may cause fatal hypernatraemia and should never be used. Gastric lavage of tobacco with potassium permanganate solution seems hazardous rather than helpful. 'Circulatory stimulants', thiopentone (for convulsions), physostigmine and adrenaline are advised with no mention of any side-effects or dangers. Levallorphan (not naloxone) is suggested as the specific antidote for opium poisoning. The most remarkable advice is to treat hemlock poisoning with strychnine.

This book is said to be for pharmacists, doctors, toxicologists and biologists. Would it be useful in emergency medicine? It is clearly an essential reference for the Poisons Information Services, but I am doubtful about its value to an accident and emergency department. It could be useful for plant identification, but the botanical and biochemical details are excessive and the advice on treatment inadequate and sometimes misleading. Perhaps I will be able to recommend the next edition of this book.

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