BOOK REVIEW

Toxic Emergencies

Edited by WILLIAM HANSON JR

Churchill Livingstone, Edinburgh. 1984. 319pp. £32.00.

Poisoned patients are common in accident and emergency departments and many books about poisons are now available. Would this one be useful too? This book is volume 5 in the series *Clinics in Emergency Medicine* and is intended for emergency and primary care physicians. The eighteen contributors are all American and the book reflects American attitudes and experience of poisoning.

There are chapters on the initial management of poisoning, poisoning in children, and on various topics such as poisoning by household products, inhaled gases and swallowed liquids. Some drugs are covered but the book is far from comprehensive. The book states that drug sales give a good indication of the types of poisoning seen in emergency departments and lists the 'top ten' prescription drugs in the United States, but the effects of only two of them are mentioned.

Many references are quoted, but unfortunately much of the text is learned rather than of practical value and sometimes suggests a lack of personal experience of the problem discussed. I was surprised to read that 'accidental poisonings comprise the vast majority of poisoning exposures'. I was alarmed at the suggested treatment for tricyclic antidepressant poisoning. The author advises physostigmine, lidocaine, phenytoin and propranolol for cardiac arrhythmias, without mentioning that such ill patients are often hypoxic and likely to need ventilation much more than any antiarrhythmic drug. In another chapter a long list of 'commonly used' antidotes includes those for silver, arsenic and bromide poisoning but omits the antidotes for some more likely problems such as beta-adrenergic blockers, digoxin, potassium or oral hypoglycaemic drugs.

Despite these and other criticisms some sections of this book could undoubtedly be helpful. There are useful discussions of the problems of drug abuse, the management of iron poisoning and the effects of ingestion of small batteries (which can cause serious or even fatal poisoning). But these do not justify purchase of this book. If one wants practical advice on how to manage poisoned patients the first book to look at is Proudfoot's *Diagnosis and Management of Acute Poisoning* (Blackwell Scientific Publications, Oxford). Another helpful book is Vale & Meredith's *Poisoning: Diagnosis and Treatment* (Update Books, London). These books are more reliable, more useful, and much cheaper than *Toxic Emergencies*.

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