

The 1984 Year Book of Anaesthesia

Edited by R. D. MILLER *et al.*

Year Book Medical Publishers, Inc, Chicago. £41.50.

The anaesthetist is well suited to coping with the problems of emergency medicine, by virtue of his daily involvement with the unconscious patient. However, there is more to the subject of anaesthesia than this. The field has been expanding rapidly in recent years, increasingly demanding the development of sub-specialization both clinically and in research. *The 1984 Year Book of Anaesthesia* reflects this diversification and so will be found to contain much that is only of peripheral interest to the clinician in charge of an accident and emergency department.

It consists of a selection of recent papers covering twelve main areas of anaesthetic research. Each paper is presented in condensed form, and is followed by a commentary by one of the five American editors, all professors of anaesthesia, headed by R. D. Miller from the University of California in San Francisco. The book starts with a short section containing a mixed bag of topics including a useful review of the subject of brain death. In the following sections, considerable attention is paid to the areas of pharmacology, critical care and the anaesthetic problems associated with certain types of surgery. Monitoring, anaesthetic techniques, anaesthetic risks, the subject of pain relief and post-operative complications are dealt with rather more briefly, while there is a section of intermediate length on ventilation which contains a number of topics of relevance to emergency medicine. Surprisingly, there is no section dealing with developments in anaesthetic apparatus and there is disappointingly little material on some topics of current interest, such as the adult respiratory distress syndrome and the endogenous opiates.

While the journals represented are international in range, the majority of the papers originate from North American institutions and there is little material from journals not originally published in English. The claim for the Year Book series, that it represents 'the essence of the best of the recent international medical literature', might therefore be regarded by some as rather parochial and, indeed, a reading of some of the papers included tends further to undermine the validity of this claim.

There are, for example, two papers in the section on obstetric anaesthesia which purport to identify a previously unknown organism belonging to the orders of helminths, found in the blood of patients with toxemia of pregnancy and gestational trophoblastic disease. The authors go as far as to name the organism *Hydatoxi lualba* and suggest this may be responsible for these diseases. The commentary dispels this illusion by quoting in full a paper from the *Lancet* demonstrating that the 'organism' was in fact a slide preparation artifact. Perhaps the best that can be said for including such material is that it adds a little spice to what would otherwise be a fairly indigestible book.

Perhaps the most useful section of the book for the emergency physician is that dealing with critical care, particularly the papers on resuscitation, fluid balance, shock and trauma. Other topics of interest include, in the section on ventilation, papers on intubation, percutaneous transtracheal ventilation and positive end-expiratory pressure; in the section on monitoring, a description of a technique for monitoring ECG via an endotracheal tube; in the section on anaesthesia for certain types of surgery,

papers on intracranial pressure, respiratory distress, epiglottitis and pulmonary aspiration; in the section on special patient groups, a paper on the use of nitrous oxide for minor orthopaedic procedures; and a paper on sudden infant death suggesting a possible link with malignant hyperpyrexia which is (wrongly) placed in the section on post-operative complications. In the same section there is a paper drawing attention to the increased risk of regurgitation associated with the presence of a naso-gastric tube in the unconscious patient, which should be of interest to those considering use of the oesophageal pacemaker in the emergency situation.

Most of these papers are well presented and quite readable in their condensed form, in contrast to some of the material in other sections. Indeed, if the reader is mainly interested in emergency care, the book will provide much useful information. The presence of an author as well as a subject index will help those who wish to use it as a reference work. However, some subjects do turn up in unexpected places; for example an interesting paper on the use of nitroglycerine ointment to facilitate venepuncture will be found in the section on monitoring.

The real failure of the book is not just that it includes some substandard research, nor that it relies too much on North American material, but that it tries to do too much by trying to compress a great deal of material while, at the same time, provide a balanced assessment of its value. Inevitably, important points are missed or insufficiently stressed, or a single paper is taken as representative and authoritative when, in fact, there may be much contradictory evidence to which no reference is made; inevitably, too, the reader is drawn to the commentaries for enlightenment rather than to try to digest the data unaided, so that, in the end, it is the views of the commentators, rather than the conclusions of the authors, that are judged.

In conclusion, it has to be said that, from a scientific point of view, this is a rather stage-managed book which does not really succeed in its declared aim. It does, however, offer a broad overview of developments in the speciality and is well signposted for those who may wish to travel further.

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