BOOK REVIEWS

Fetal and Infant Origins of Adult Disease. Ed D J P Barker. (pp 343; £24.95) BMJ, London, 1992. ISBN 0-7279-0743-3.

Though nothing in science is ever totally new, some observations have enough novelty, or are presented in a sufficiently novel way, to be captivating. The set of ideas gathered together here is a perfect example of this.

This collection of papers written by David Barker and colleagues with an introduction by Roger Robinson, Emeritus Professor of Paediatrics at Guy's and St Thomas's. It presents much of the evidence relating adult mortality and metabolism to early fetal and infant development. The story begins with descriptions of spatial and temporal associations made largely on the basis of routinely collected statistics from the United Kingdom and Norway. As with all such studies their results were inconclusive but raise a host of important questions. The methodological "breakthrough", as is well known to all devotees of television science as well as to those who follow the literature, was the existence in Hertfordshire and Lancashire, of well recorded data on the early lives of individuals whose later mortality and metabolic characteristics could be determined.

Important sections in the introduction deal with the difficult issue of confounding and the implications of these findings for prevention. Professor Robinson has covered these well. Neither his nor the later sections will, however, totally allay the doubts of the sceptical reader, but then, that is part of the attraction of these observations—they will stimulate discussion and activity for some time to come. For prevention the message is optimistic. It is not so much a case of action in adult life being too late but the strengthening of a previously promulgated message—that, to be effective, the prevention of adult disease must start early—with the health of the fetus and of the mother. If this volume can be faulted it is only because insufficient attention has been paid to evidence already accumulated by our veterinary colleagues that the health of each generation is heavily influenced from the time of conception and before.

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Occult Atherosclerotic Disease. Diagnosis, Assessment and Management. Eds A-M Salmasi, A N Nicolaides. (Pp 353; £86.50) Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1991. ISBN 0-79231188-4.

Therapeutic attention in atherosclerosis has to date been focused upon those patients with clinically evident disease, often in the terminal form of organ infarction. The growth in non-invasive investigative procedures as well as the prospects for manipulating deranged vascular biology at an earlier phase of the disease process make the appearance of this book timely and necessary.

In traditional fashion the text begins with a treatise on the cell biology and pathology of atherosclerosis. The first is scholarly and a

useful summary of current knowledge; the second is poorly written and was not properly proof read.

The next four sections deal with occult cerebrovascular, coronary artery, aortic and lower limb, and renal and mesenteric arterial disease respectively. The international contributors are by and large authorities in their fields. The first three of these sections are introduced by excellent reviews of the natural history and epidemiology of arterial disease in their respective territories. Considerable attention is paid to the various diagnostic techniques for detecting preclinical arterial disease and contemporary management is discussed.

The final section of the book contains important directions for the future; the molecular revolution is anticipated in a review of the use of DNA technology in the diagnosis of occult atherosclerotic disease. Fascinating data on the concurrence of arterial disease at various sites and guidance on who should be investigated for occult atherosclerotic disease are presented.

Appropriately, the book ends with a section on prevention which necessitates a return to the aetiology of the condition and the role of risk factors. A cogent review of the place of cholesterol lowering is included but given the forward looking nature of the rest of the book it is perhaps disappointing that there is no reference to the unifying concept of the insulin resistance syndrome.

The book is well referenced and indexed and is an essential addition to the library of all those interested in contemporary management of atherosclerotic disease.

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Toxic Oil Syndrome: Current Knowledge and Future Perspectives. WHO, Geneva, 1992. (Pp 163; SwFr 31). ISBN 92 890 1305 2.

Toxic oil syndrome (TOS) is a food-borne disease which produced an outbreak of epidemic proportions in central Spain in the spring and summer of 1981. After toxic-epidemiological studies, there is wide consensus that a toxin was responsible for the condition and that it was spread among the population by rape seed oil, illegally sold for human consumption. The oil had been imported from France for industrial use at subsidised prices and denatured with aniline as a marker; it then underwent illegal refining to eliminate the tint, in a procedure whose details are not well known, and was eventually sold door to door or in weekly markets as edible oil.

More than 20 000 cases were diagnosed, about 1000 people died, many had sequelae, and a proportion of the victims are still developing late complications, such as pulmonary hypertension or chronic hepatitis. A precise aetiological agent has not yet been identified.

The report is the result of a joint effort of the Regional Office for Europe of the WHO and the Spanish Health Research Fund and aims to disseminate current knowledge on TOS in order to prevent the occurrence of similar

epidemics in the future. The description of the investigation of the outbreak is short and its public health implications are briefly discussed in the preface, foreword, and introduction; the bulk of the book is devoted to clinical and pathological description and to the toxicological studies. The final, "Future Research", chapter (no author mentioned) is to me a very interesting one and will produce the key to the final solution of the quest for the causal toxic agent. It also outlines a well constructed methodological frame that could apply to other research subjects.

The book constitutes another call for food safety in the context of health protection but it will be of more interest because of the clinical description and the toxicological investigation than the discussion of its implications for a healthy public policy.

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Authorities and Partisans: the Debate on Unemployment and Health. By Mel Bartley (Pp 258; £37.50) Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1992. ISBN 074860334-4.

With Britain "bumping along the floor of a recession" this book makes a timely and interesting contribution to published work on unemployment and health. Those interested in this important public health topic should be warned not to expect a review of evidence for the hypothesis that unemployment causes ill health. Instead, they will find in Mel Bartley's 240 page account a fascinating sociological history of how researchers took up this question, how they were funded for the research, and how their results were received, used and, in some cases, ignored by politicians and civil servants.

Most of the text is refreshingly clear, although there are occasional excursions into sociological detail and thinking which can be hard to follow. The way in which social science, public health, and economic thinking and research progressed with respect to unemployment during the late 1970s and 1980s is presented with very much that attention to the detail of personalities and processes involved that is seen in, for example, James Watson's account of the discovery of structure of DNA. The progress from research to policy is not at all a simple, objective process, but one that depends very much on the interests of researchers, their ability to secure funding, the way their case is published and presented and, finally and most importantly, the political views and prejudices of those involved in implementing social policy.

In the first part of the book, the reader is taken from the changes in public health organisation of the mid-1970s to the interest of the Unit for the Study of Health Policy in Unemployment, and the intervention of Harvey Brenner in the debate together with the associated publicity received in the mass media. From the Black report in the early 1980s research progressed via the British Regional Heart Study and the important OPCS Longitudinal Study to Beale's fascinating account of the effect of unemployment on health in a general practice setting. Throughout the first part of the book a fascinating portrait is painted of the various players in the debate.

The second part of the book describes how both the official and scientific response to the