

## Book Review

*Medical Microbiology*, Eds C. A. MIMS, J. H. L. PLAYFAIR, I. M. ROITT, AND ROSUMUND WILLIAMS. Mosby 1993. £24.95. ISBN 0-397-44631-4.

The question of whether medical microbiology should be taught in a systematic (organism-based) or a systemic (disease-based) fashion has long been debated. Nearly everyone agrees that the disease approach is intrinsically more interesting and relevant to medical students, but the micro-organisms themselves stubbornly refuse to stand aside and it is hard to dispense with the need to provide some systematic teaching of the properties of microbes as a prelude to understanding the diseases they cause.

This book, by a team in which, unusually, immunologists are strongly represented, offers yet another approach: to present microbiology first as a battleground between infectious agents and their hosts, and then to move on to the diseases they cause, system by system. Although there is an early chapter on the general properties of micro-organisms and two bridging chapters in the middle of the book dealing with specimen collection and laboratory diagnosis, most of the systematic information on individual microbes and specimen processing is relegated to rather dull appendices at the end of the book.

The authors and production team are to be congratulated on the skilful way this project has been put together. Everything is here if one knows where to look: all types of infectious agent, including helminths and arthropods, are given their due; snippets of history are interpolated in appropriate parts of the text; the design, lay-out, use of colour and standard of illustrations are all uniformly excellent.

Can this book, then, be unequivocally recommended as a student text? The immunobiological approach that the authors have adopted certainly has its attractions (and it is a delight to see immunologists taking microbiology seriously once more; is this a side effect of the AIDS pandemic?). It is, moreover, undoubtedly true that traditional textbooks of medical microbiology have generally underplayed aspects of the host-parasite relationship that this book makes its central theme. But from the student's point of view, the book's strengths may also represent its weakness. In truth, the book has the wrong title: it is not a textbook of medical microbiology; it is about the way microbes and man interact in their mutual struggle for survival. This is an admirable and creative way of looking at infection and one that all microbiologists could profitably consider; but few courses integrate immunology and microbiology in the way this book demands, and to be successful the course would need to be closely structured to the novel format that the authors favour. Moreover, I am left with the persistent feeling (am I merely showing my age?) that to gain most benefit from this book, newcomers to the subject would really need a prior grounding in the classic principles of microbiology that the authors have specifically eschewed.

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