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Book Reviews

Waterborne Disease. Paul R. Hunter. John Wiley and Sons, Chichester, 1997, £60.00.

For those of us who have little time to keep up with the literature, this is a useful book. After four general chapters on epidemiological methods, on water supply, and on drinking, swimming and health, the following 26 chapters deal each with a specific pathogen, and the final three with health aspects of chemicals in water. Material in the introductory chapters is mainly culled from textbooks, while most of the rest comes from a search of literature databases such as Medline.

The author helpfully describes his information sources and search strategies, but such literature reviews inevitably have some shortcomings. The emphasis is on papers in English. There are few references to books, so there is no mention of the big World Bank review on pathogen survival in the environment (Feachem et al. 1983). There are also few references to the water engineering literature. Some of the accounts of outbreaks, from the public health and microbiological literature, are hazy on the hydrogeological and technical detail which the water engineer, seeking to prevent such outbreaks, would find useful.

The list of pathogens considered is very complete, including 'new' ones such as Cryptosporidium, and others not often thought of as waterborne. Indeed, it is almost too complete; the chapter on mycobacterial infections describes a number of pseudo-epidemics in which samples were contaminated by unsterilized tap water, but no-one became ill. The chapters on the effect of chemicals in water are also thorough and a handy reference source.

There is much fascinating and even surprising information in the book, and the author's experience (he works for the UK Public Health Laboratory Service) supports the astute judgement with which he assesses the evidence. It is a sign of how helpful his comments are, that one would have liked to see more of them, drawing the lessons from the various studies he describes.

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Drugs and Pregnancy. Second Edition. Eds L. H. Gilstrap, III and B. B. Little. Chapman & Hall, New York, 1997, £95.00.

In most societies most pregnant women use some kind of traditional, recreational, over the counter, or prescribed drugs in pregnancy. To an epidemiologist, this is a massive uncontrolled experiment enrolling over 50% of all pregnant women. To a clinician, drug use and prescribing drugs in pregnancy represents a clinical dilemma as many drugs have different pharmacokinetics in pregnancy and an often unpredictable effect on the individual embryo, fetus and neonate. To public health physicians, this is a potential source of a large burden of disease.

This book by Gilstrap and Little offers a first source of information for all these specialists. In 34 chapters 'Drugs and Pregnancy' deals with virtually all over the counter, prescription only, and recreational drugs available. Each chapter has an extensive and up to date bibliography (until 1996) and most chapters contain very useful summaries. The inclusion of many tables allow rapid access to essential information. So far-so good.

Any book with a £95 price tag will have to be considerably better than its competitors. The most important reference book about drugs in the UK is the British National Formula (BNF). The BNF costs £13·50 and is updated every 3 months. It provides information about recommended drug dosage and use during pregnancy and lactation (something sadly missing for most drugs covered in 'Drugs and Pregnancy'). For in depth information concerning drugs and medical conditions obstetricians in the UK are likely to turn to De Swiet's book 'Medical Disorders in Obstetric Practice' (1995) which for £59·50 in my opinion has a better coverage of diseases and their drug management than 'Drugs and Pregnancy'. Compared to the BNF or 'Medical Disorders in Obstetric Practice', 'Drugs and Pregnancy' provides the better scholarly overview over drug effects including drug-induced congenital malformations. It also has the better bibliography and is the better source of epidemiological and public health data but for £95 this is a book for the reference section of large libraries rather than the desks of epidemiologists or public health physicians. Clinicians are likely to stick to their regularly updated BNF.

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