BOOKS RECEIVED

Pathogenic streptococci

A collection of 156 miscellaneous papers on streptococci may seem a daunting prospect for even the most dedicated of readers. However, this large volume has the good fortune to be edited by Dr M. T. Parker, whose surgical skill is evident throughout. Indeed, some of the contributions occupy no more than a dozen or so lines—whether due to drastic resection or idiopathic inanition is uncertain. Another notable feature is the publication of this volume within 9 months of the Oxford symposium it perpetuates. This is a respectable gestation period for future editors to note, but is all too rare in a medical book.

A little more than 100 years since their discovery (either by Billroth in Vienna, or Ogston in Aberdeen—depending on personal bias), the streptococci are still doing remarkably well. This is attested by the seven international symposia held since 1960, and of course by Dr Parker’s book. Sir Robert Williams, in his delightful opening paper, sketches the decline of that archetypal pathogen, the group-A haemolytic streptococcus, but much light is still being shed—albeit obliquely, in its present eclipsed state. The 83 papers on its structure, extracellular products, immunology, genetics, antibiotic susceptibilities, and clinico-pathological effects look askance at its supposed demise. Considerable attention is of course also paid to the currently more luminous satellites, notably the fascinating group-B streptococci and Streptococcus mutans which has risen again as the leading “cariogenic” species, 55 years after its discovery by Killian Clarke.

The “cross-reactive” nature of discussions on streptococci leads, as Dr Parker points out, to editorial problems, but also provides a wide readership with a cornucopia of discoveries. Thus, even the most erudite of skin microbiologists or human micro-ecologists will be delighted to learn about skin infections among abattoir workers, the enhanced ability of group-A streptococci from skin sepsis to survive and thrive under rigorous conditions compared with the more pampered “throat” strains, the possible epidermal origin of at least some viridans bacteraemias and endocarditides, the defensive role of “viridins” from α-haemolytic streptococci in the oropharynx, and—most unexpected of all—the demonstration by Clewell and colleagues that some strains of Streptococcus faecalis var. zymogenes exert sex appeal on their neighbours by secreting pheromones to “enhance to mating potential of donors.”

Despite the surprising inclusion of a section of advertisements, the book is unfortunately very expensive. Nevertheless, departments of medical microbiology would be well advised to disburse £21 even at the risk of their financial solvency.

SYDNEY SELWYN

Hospital-associated infections in the compromised host

This is the second volume of the “Handbook on hospital associated infection”. The first dealt with occurrence, diagnosis and sources, and more volumes are in preparation. The intention of the series is to present “a concise review of the state of the art” but also to make the series “references for hospital personnel interested and concerned with nosocomial infections”. This is a tall order but it implies in-depth study of individual problems whilst not omitting subjects for reference purposes. It is in this latter respect that the current volume may be criticised, for although there is, for example, an excellent review of immunodeficiency in the cancer patient with a detailed description of methods of testing for lymphocyte function, this has
not been extended to include granulocyte function. Although the text is abundantly referenced, there is a hint of the selective about much of the text, for the authors are mainly associated with cancer chemotherapy and its problems. This leaves the more mundane problems of infection in diabetes or steroid therapy receiving no more than a passing mention. This has naturally led to selection in references, most of which are those of the individual authors or their close colleagues and, although the expertise in any given topic is not in doubt, this does lessen the value of the work as a major source of reference.

These criticisms apart, and if the book is taken as a series of selected essay topics, there are several important statements by the contemporary leaders in their fields. The chapter by Schimpff on the the importance of the clinical cause in diagnosis is fascinating and is full of practical hints that result from his immense experience—in particular, the advice on where to look for the sites of origin of infecting organisms is most useful. Winston and Hewitt then describe any number of unusual micro-organisms that may infect the compromised patient—a useful section here on fungi and protozoa for the uninitiated. Protective isolation in the form of laminar-airflow rooms is then discussed in a practical manner by Bodey but the justification for these is still not absolute; his arguments may apply more readily in America than Britain. Perhaps the most controversial chapter then follows, discussing surgical methods of obtaining specimens. Armstrong discusses the matter dispassionately, but fails to correlate prognosis and patient acceptance with instigation of invasive procedures. British and American views on the ethics of this difficult field are still divergent and perhaps there is a lack of sensitivity towards international thought here. Finally, treatment is considered in a rather short section in which more than three-quarters of the references are to the author’s or his close associates’ publications.

At the current exchange rate with the Swiss franc, it might be prudent to browse a copy before ordering.

P. D. CLARKE

Drugs and immune responsiveness

This well produced little book consists of the papers presented at a meeting held in April 1978 at the Middlesex Hospital Medical School in London. The editors in their introduction divide immunopharmacology into, firstly, mediator production during immune reactions and, secondly, the relationship between drugs and the immune response. The papers published in this book deal with the latter aspect and consist of original and review papers which can be further divided into three categories: immunosuppressive drugs, immunenhancing drugs, and allergic reactions to drugs. The papers differ considerably in quality, but serve to emphasise our profound lack of understanding of this whole field. Knowledge in basic immunology continues to expand rapidly, and is now demonstrating such a highly complex and finely balanced system than one feels that blunderbuss attempts at modulating the responses of the immune system are almost bound to fail. It is refreshing to see the publication of work that attempts to tackle the complexity of the situation, the paper by Professor Turk and Dr Parker being a highlight in this regard. One hopes that their type of approach can be adapted to the human animal and certainly there are now rapid advances being made in the development of techniques for the study in vitro of human immune responses. Unfortunately, there is nothing in this volume that makes use of these advances.

The paper on Levamisole, in chapter 6, tries to make a case for the use of this drug in a fairly broad range of conditions. However, the therapeutic value of Levamisole has yet to be demonstrated and this chapter needs to be read with some scepticism; unqualified statements about its use in cancer, in the discussion, would have been better omitted. This chapter is balanced by an extremely interesting report on the muramyl-dipeptides which are the minimal structural units retaining the immunopharmacological properties of the mycobacterial component of Freund’s complete adjuvant. The table on page 158, describing some of the potential hazards of the use of potent immune stimulants, should provoke some thought and discourage therapeutic adventurism.