BOOKS RECEIVED

Essential clinical microbiology: an introductory text

Dr Cooke and Dr Gibson have written this book from their experience of teaching medical students in Leeds. It is not so much a text on microbiology as an introduction to communicable diseases. The first two chapters, supported by Renee Bailey’s excellent line drawings, concern the general properties of micro-organisms and deal briefly with their morphology, physiology, genetics, habitat, pathogenicity, and the host defences against them. Then follow eight chapters on infections of the various body systems, and one chapter each for generalised bacterial, mycotic, viral and helminthic diseases, and for hospital infection, sterilisation and disinfection, antibiotic and chemotherapy, environmental hygiene, immunisation, and laboratory methods.

In the systems chapters there are helpful guidelines for clinicians on use of the laboratory for diagnosis. There is not enough clinical information for the student of medicine and not enough on microbiology for the student who seeks more than the barest outlines of the subject. But the bringing together of the two topics provides an excellent introduction to the study of either. If every practising clinician remembered this much microbiology he would be well served by it.

I foresee a good future for this book, with a call for many new editions. When the first of these is being prepared the following items, among others, will need attention. Some parts of the text should be rearranged so that technical terms are not used, without a forward reference, before they are explained, such as “gram-positive” and “gram-negative” on page 3 and several terms in the section on microbial genetics. Some veterinarians may not agree with the indication (p. 44) that there are only three species of Brucella. “Streptococcus viridans” is treated as though it is a genuine species, without discussion of the several species that are covered by the non-specific term “viridans streptococci”. In the one-line entry for the laboratory diagnosis of pneumonia (p. 75) and the later section on microscopy of sputum (p. 264), there is no mention of the sometimes life-saving value of direct microscopy, which can lead to the rapid diagnosis and effective treatment of staphylococcal pneumonia. Bacterial counts in urine are nowadays increasingly reported per litre rather than per ml (p. 96). On p. 132 is the traditional statement, as in almost every other relevant text, that in actinomycosis, microscopy of crushed “sulphur granules” reveals a tangled mass of mycelia. Indeed it does, but if that is all a microbiologist looks for, many cases of actinomycosis will be missed because, much more often, all that can be seen are separate and very short rods with even shorter branch stubs. The section on isolation of patients presumes that for source isolation and for protective (“reverse”) isolation, two types of room, with opposite-direction ventilation, will be available. It would be worth mentioning that only one type of room, with strong exhaust from an airlock lobby, gives protection from airborne infection in both directions and serves either purpose—or both at the same time. The description of autoclaves would be easier for a beginner to understand if there were a simple diagram.

In the section on collection of specimens, the term “universal container” refers to a type of screw-capped bottle that is decreasingly used in British laboratories and will be meaningless to foreign readers. There are no references; perhaps this is reasonable in a book of this type, but a select reading list would be useful. Many items in the text are not included in the index, for example “Streptococcus viridans” and Corynebacterium ulcerans. The style of writing is casual and sometimes sloppy. On pages 48–49, seven of the twelve paragraphs begin with the same word, as do many others throughout the book; and (p. 140) a carelessly constructed sentence gives the surely unintended meaning that benzylpenicillin can be given by mouth.

Few first editions appear without many such needs for improvement and the examples I have quoted do not greatly detract from this otherwise excellent book. It is printed on beautifully smooth but non-reflective paper and, at £6.95, is good value.

R. Blowes