BOOK REVIEW

Infectious diseases of the fetus and newborn infant. Fourth edn. Edited by Jack Remington and Jerome Klein. (Pp 1373, £142 hardback.) WB Saunders Company, 1995. ISBN 0-7216-6782-1.

Although a triumph of modern medicine is our partial conquest of infectious disease, the battle is not won. In spite of immunisation reducing the incidence of congenital rubella syndrome, the relative importance of most congenital infections in the developed world has increased with the fall in perinatal and infant mortality. Worldwide, vertically transmitted AIDS is increasing. Overwhelming neonatal infection still occurs, even where advanced medical care is available. This new edition is therefore welcome.

Fifty eight authors have contributed 35 chapters. Topics include host defences,

factors associated with infection, diagnostic methods, bacterial septicaemia, localised infection, and the clinical pharmacology of antibacterials. Chapters on specific organisms have a common plan and cover microbiology, epidemiology, pathogenesis and pathology, clinical features, diagnosis, prognosis, treatment and prevention. The book is intended for a wide audience from medical students to practising physicians.

Since the previous edition in 1990, chapters have been added: prenatal diagnosis, Lyme disease, parvovirus B19, and laboratory aids for the diagnosis of neonatal sepsis. There is also a new section on herpesvirus 6. The chapter on developmental immunology has been entirely rewritten, and many of the other established chapters have been updated with new tables and references, to 1993.

The price paid for thoroughness and detail can be a difficulty in seeing the wood for the trees. Many of the authors use their expertise to guide the reader through a maze of sometimes conflicting material, but others modestly step aside. The inclusion of case reports and consideration of small series of cases is a salutary reminder of the shaky basis of some of our knowledge and the paucity of prospective controlled studies. Though the

need for these is obvious, they are difficult and costly to organise because of the rarity of many of the conditions and the need for long term follow up.

For me, the data from such studies are some of the more interesting parts of the book. For example, an informative diagram quantifies risks to the fetus of cytomegalovirus infection in pregnancy. I would have liked to see an analogous diagram for each congenital infection for which information is available. Guidelines for treatment and prevention are helpful, practical, and specific. It is a pity that diagrams are used so sparingly and that photographs, including those of skin rashes, are in black and white. Students should be aware that familiarity with microbiological terms and immunological methods is assumed. Unusually for an American text, neither the layout nor the index inexorably leads the reader to the essentials.

In spite of these irritations, I shall continue to enjoy mining this handsome book. And let me share a small nugget which satisfied a minor curiosity. Why do we hear of parvovirus B19 but never of parvoviruses A or B1 to 18? Because they never existed – B19 was no more than the designation of the specimen from which the first isolate came.

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