Book reviews


‘His book’, writes Joseph Lee Hollander in the foreword to H. G. Fassbender’s Pathology of Rheumatic Diseases, ‘will be a much used addition to my library on arthritis.’ Many rheumatologists and pathologists will share this view, and be glad to possess these handsomely produced results of 25 years’ experience and careful study. Most of the space is occupied by 444 black and white illustrations, many of the photomicrographs being very fine (such as those showing palisading surrounding necrotic vessels) or unusual (such as the appearance of synovial histology after several hundred intra-articular injections).

Despite its comprehensive title, the book is nevertheless rather selective, limiting itself to accounts of rheumatic fever, rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, psoriatic arthritis, gout, chondrocalcinosis, osteoarthritis, and nonarticular rheumatism (with very short sections on the components of connective tissue, pathological reactions, and experimental arthritis). It is therefore in no way a general reference work and does not deal, for example, with the various forms of infectious arthritis, Reiter’s disease, disc degeneration, and spondylitis, or the inflammatory disorders of connective tissue such as lupus erythematosus. Moreover, Professor Fassbender, probably very wisely, confines himself to his morphological studies. His tool is the light microscope, and to a lesser extent the electron microscope. Although he does not hesitate to theorize about the relation of pathological findings to immunological events, no attempt is made to explore current concepts of immunopathology in any depth. Again, while accepting the usually-held view that the articular surface in rheumatoid arthritis is eroded by enzymatic activity originating from synovial tissue cells, he does not discuss this any further in histochemical terms.

The text, though relatively short, makes stimulating reading. The author emphasizes the distinctive features and pathogenesis of the various necrotic lesions occurring in rheumatoid arthritis and their independence from other types of inflammatory reaction found in that disease. He also maintains—but gives no further details or references—that there is an association between the proliferation of local connective tissue cells in rheumatoid synovium (‘mesenchymoid transformation’) and disease activity as indicated clinically and serologically; while infiltration with lymphocytes and plasma cells appears to be associated more with remission, an observation in line with those of Ken Muirden.

A number of very small errors will require correction in future editions. For example, constrictive pericarditis has been described in association with rheumatoid arthritis, and it is unlikely that A. V. Cornil wrote a paper entitled ‘Still’s disease’ in 1864.

Professor Fassbender’s approach is essentially historical, the frequent references to his former teacher and collaborator, Fritz Klinge, being especially a nice balance of respectful admiration and cautious criticism. Unlike most writers in this country and the USA, he takes his references widely from European and other sources.

For the opportunity of reading the work of this distinguished German pathologist we must thank our own Gerald Loewi, whose skilful translation is both readable and clear, sometimes with quite felicitous phrases, as when the author graciously concedes that his own expression ‘streptococcal granulomatosis’ has not quite caught on, and so ‘we will abandon terminological perfectionism in favour of the consensus term rheumatic fever’; or ‘spinal ankylosis has been able to play the role of a fossil in the history of medicine’. Occasionally the words flow slightly less freely, owing no doubt to Dr. Loewi’s punctilious care in interpreting the original.

As Dr. Helen Waddell once wrote: ‘A man cannot say “I will translate”, any more than he can say “I will compose poetry”. In this minor art, also, the wind blows where it lists.’

J. T. SCOTT


This slender volume is the fourth in the series ‘Structure and Function in Disease’ monographs, previous volumes dealing with the kidney, nervous system, and endocrine glands. Their object is ‘to offer an integrated presentation of structure and function to all students of disease,’ but it is directed principally to medical students and junior staff. The musculoskeletal system is particularly suitable for presentation of the interplay between structure and function and the authors make the most of the opportunities it affords.

The first chapter deals with the normal aspects of the connective tissues both as mechanical and living systems and immediately introduces one of the extremely valuable features of the book, namely the use of quantitative data not easily found elsewhere. For example, elastin stretches 20 to 30% before it tears, collagen only 1%; sugars form 4 to 10% of reticulin but only 0.5% of collagen. References, however, although given at the end of each chapter, are selected and not directly referred to in the body of the text. This is a pity, as one would like to know who established that in bone ‘approximately 100 acres of crystalite surface, a small fraction of the total, are exposed to the circulating body fluids’.

The next three chapters deal briefly but adequately with bone, joints, and skeletal muscle, and again provide quantitative information of particular interest. For example, during squatting the pressure on the femoral patellar surface reaches 1000 pounds in a man weighing 150 lbs; and the estimated blood flow in human bone is 1400 ml/min. On the nonquantitative side good simple accounts are given of the chemical changes underlying muscular contraction, the structure of the neuromuscular junction, and the basis of electromyography.

Musculoskeletal disease is dealt with in an unusual but informative manner under the following headings: