Book reviews


In recent years the study of rheumatoid arthritis and plausible animal models has produced a wealth of evidence for immunological mechanisms in the pathology of the disease, but has failed to provide an answer to the basic aetiology. Perhaps infection as the trigger factor could be the necessary clue. In March 1974 a symposium on infection and immunology in the rheumatic diseases was organized in London by the WHO and the ARC jointly. The extended, up-dated contents, have now been published under the energetic editorship of D. C. Dumonde. As he says in his preface, 'rheumatoid arthritis was once regarded as an infectious disease and in recent years further advances in microbiology and immunology have brought the concept of infection to the forefront again'.

The contents of this major volume include 79 individual contributions plus an over-view of the possibility for further co-operation in the field. The subject matter runs easily through 4 major sections, starting with the known mechanisms of the immune response to infection and moving to a major section on the varied evidence linking rheumatic disease to infection. A short section on genetic and epidemiological factors includes a review of the HLA system and the immune response by Bodmer. It also contains an article on hepatitis B by Zuckerman and another on Yersinia arthritis by Aho—the two areas currently where human disease seems to come closest to the theory book. Part 4 is an over-view of immunopathological mechanisms of inflammation in relation to the rheumatic diseases which could stand as a separate volume in its own right. Finally, the loose ends are tied up in an inevitably weaker section on future trends, which includes an interesting sideways look at multiple sclerosis as another example of a disease looking for an aetiology within the field of infection and immunity.

The original conference was well organized and a pleasure to attend. This fully edited version of the proceedings includes several new sections to round it off. The fact that it is based on a series of verbal contributions has made the presentation of the data concise. Adequate and often extensive references are given after each paper. The inclusion of discussion sections after each series of papers is valuable both for content and for cohesion. This volume should be studied by all those interested in rheumatology as the material presented is dedicated entirely to one view of the possible aetiology of RA to the exclusion of all other hypotheses. No easy answers are provided but the extensive evidence presented gives the exciting feeling that the answer, however complex, is tantalizingly near our grasp. Taken as a whole it makes a most convincing case for further study along these lines, at the very least. The collection of so much material in one volume will make this a major reference work on the subject for clinicians and research workers alike. It should be in every rheumatology and clinical immunology library, although unfortunately its cost will prevent the majority from possessing an individual copy.

P. A. Bacon


This publication of the National Foundation records the proceedings of the 1974 Birth Defect Conference in California. Victor McKusick, Chairman of the Department of Medicine at Johns Hopkins and leading authority in the field, contributes a thoughtful first paper on classification dividing the inherited disorders of connective tissue into those with predominant involvement of fibrous tissue and those involving mainly nonfibrous elements, subdividing the first into primary (such as Marfan's syndrome) and secondary involvement of fibrous elements such as talcopathria, and going on to discuss heterogeneity. In all there are well over 100 contributors and about 50 papers with discussion and case reports. Clinical, radiological, histological, and electron microscope illustrations are well reproduced. Rheumatologists will find this of considerable interest, particularly the chapters on abnormal collagen, and some clinical use, as will of course paediatricians who are most closely involved with diagnosis and care of such patients.

E. G. L. Bywaters