

Notes and news

Forthcoming events

In 1993

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| <p>15–19 Mar Seminar in advanced rheumatology, New York University Medical Center. Fee \$650. CHE: 25.5 category I credit hours—AMA
Contact: Melanie Fanelli, New York University, 550 First Avenue, New York, NY 10016, USA. Tel: (212) 263 5295</p> | <p>1–4 Apr Second international symposium on the immunotherapy of the rheumatic diseases, Brighton
Contact: Professor G S Panayi, Rheumatology Unit, Division of Medicine, 4th Floor Hunts House, UMDS, Guy's Hospital, London SE1 9RT. Tel: 071 955 4394. Fax: 071 407 5134</p> |
| <p>24–26 Mar BSR tenth annual general meeting, Harrogate. Closing date for submission of abstracts 4 December 1992
Contact: BSR, Lorraine Johnson, Conference Manager, 3 St Andrew's Place, London NW1 4LB. Tel: 071 224 3739. Fax: 071 224 0156</p> | <p>30 Jun–1 July Behçet's disease: sixth international conference, Paris, France. Abstract deadline: 1 March 1993
Contact: B Wechsler, Department of Internal Medicine, Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital, 83 Bd de L'Hôpital, 75013 Paris Cedex 13, France. Fax: 33 (1) 45 70 63 53</p> |
| <p>30–31 Mar Third international symposium on ankylosing spondylitis, Middlesex Hospital—HLA-B27: 20 years on. Registration fee £150
Contact: Dr Alan Ebringer, Department of Rheumatology, Middlesex Hospital, London W1</p> | <p>4–10 July XVIIIth ILAR congress of rheumatology, Barcelona, Spain
Contact: Viajes Iberia Congresos, Diagonal, 523 1o 08029 Barcelona, Spain. Tel: 34 3 4195151. Fax: 34 3 4051390. Programmes available from the BLAR secretariat.</p> |

Book review

Rheumatic diseases (WHO Technical Report Series 816). Eds World Health Organisation Scientific Group. (Pp. 60; Sw. Fr. 10/US \$9.) Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organisation, 1992. ISBN 92-4-120816-3.

A clear and precise statement of aims is the sine qua non of a scientific paper. It could usefully apply to reports and booklets such as this one, whose purpose and function are not immediately obvious.

The main purposes of this report presumably were political: to establish that rheumatic disease is an important global health issue; to set agendas for research, prevention, treatment, and education; and to call for action on all of these. In this it is successful, insofar as having a *WHO Technical Report* devoted to arthritis and rheumatism is better than having no report at all. Yet the tired rhetoric of phrases like 'the greatest need worldwide . . . is for adequate public and professional education', reiterated for each condition in turn, seems hardly likely to pitch the rheumatic diseases to the forefront of worldwide health concern.

The rheumatic diseases encompass such a diverse collection of conditions that a cogent overall view of them is elusive: this report does not provide one. It treats the 10 'most important' conditions separately, and apologises for omitting more than 90 others on grounds of feasibility. Some attempt at synthesis and balance is surely not too much to expect of a WHO report. For example, while we are told that low back pain is an epidemic in industrialised nations, we are not informed how systemic sclerosis or lupus rank in comparison. It is not made clear that individual diseases present very diverse challenges and implications for world health.

There is an attempt to inform the general reader about the

10 chosen diseases. At times this reads like short notes for an examination, at others like a discursive essay. It is too superficial to substitute for a short textbook, and at times careless in its statements ('the protection against osteoporosis lasts only as long as administration of the hormone (oestrogen) continues'). The overall impression is of an uneven collage of statements from many different disciplines. There are no references, a problem when assessing statements like 'COPCORD (the combined WHO and ILAR exercise in rheumatic disease surveys) has been extremely useful in generating epidemiological data': where are these data?

The report was produced by a committee of 19 during a five day meeting. This perhaps explains all the problems. It might account for much of it seeming to reflect personal evidence and testimony rather than a vigorous marshalling of evidence. Given the circumstances and the lack of a central perspective, this was probably as good a job as could have been done: some of the chapters, particularly that on osteoarthritis, appear remarkably well done when that context is considered. But, as Dr Johnson remarked of the dog walking on its hind legs, the point was not that it was done so well, but that it should have been thought important to do it in the first place. Is there no better way for well-informed expert opinion to be channelled into a clear and critical summary of the current global state of the rheumatic diseases? However, if this report has raised awareness in the corridors of power, then let us at least be grateful for that.

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