Book Reviews

Understanding Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism
By Gary B Mesibov, Victoria Shea, and Lynn W Adams
ISBN 0 306 46626 0 (Hardback), 0 306 46627 9 (Paperback)

In this slim book Dr Mesibov and colleagues demystify in clear simple language the confusing diagnostic nomenclature applied to the disorders on the autistic spectrum – a confusion that is due to the fact that developmental disorders are not categorical but, rather, behaviorally-defined dimensional entities with fuzzy margins and overlaps. Consequently, professionals with different perspectives are liable to use different, though basically synonymous, labels for a variety of children with normal or near normal intelligence but who have uneven social, comprehensive, and organizational abilities.

The book is divided in to 4 parts: (1) a historical review of the autistic spectrum disorders and Asperger syndrome; (2) problems with classification of these disorders, spelling out clearly that current distinctions between autism, high functioning autism, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified or atypical autism, and Asperger syndrome, may have more to do with severity than categorical considerations; (3) psychological and other assessment issues; and (4) interventions.

Not surprisingly, as two of the authors are associated with the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children Center at the University of North Carolina, the book focuses on strategies they have found useful for assisting individuals with high functioning autism/Asperger syndrome to circumvent their particular deficits and make the most of their often remarkable, if idiosyncratic, assets. The authors also provide references to other educational approaches and consider broad management issues. A final section gives an overview of the most important points covered in the book.

Strengths of the book are its even handedness in a field where opinionated views are often presented as dogma, and its resolutely practical approach, for instance, giving addresses, phone numbers, or websites in text where particular resources are cited.

Parents and educators will particularly appreciate the short case sketches that dot the book and bring to life some of the authors’ descriptions. The list of references provides an entry into the scientific literature, and the alphabetic index makes it easy to search for specific topics. But above all, I appreciate the authors’ successful attempt at clarifying the major issues that bewuddle both parents and professionals who deal with these children, adolescents, and adults.

If widely read, this modest practical book will do a lot to reduce current confusion about diagnostic and labelling issues and enhance the public’s sophistication and forbearance in dealing with individuals who invariably present challenges to others throughout their life spans.

Isabelle Rapin

Before Birth: Understanding Prenatal Screening
Edited by Elizabeth Ettorre
Aldershot, UK, Ashgate Press. 2001, pp196, £39.95
ISBN 07546 1621 5 (Hardback)

Before Birth is based on research carried out as part of a three-year collaborative project spanning four European countries: Finland, Greece, the Netherlands, and England. The EU-funded project, ‘The Development of Prenatal Screening in Europe: the past, the present, and the future’, aimed to cover a wide range of social, legal, and ethical issues relating to prenatal screening in Europe. The project was carried out between 1996 and 1999 and used a range of social research methods including qualitative interviews, postal questionnaires, and analysis of policy documents and press reports. The book explores the views and experiences of doctors, midwives, geneticists and policy makers, women using maternity services, and people who live with a condition for which screening is available.

Prenatal screening is difficult to study because of rapidly changing technologies and the wide variation in clinical approaches. Good quality information about the types of screening tests being offered and taken up in any country at a given time is not always available. Chapter 3 gives a snapshot view of screening policy, law, and ethics in all four countries during the period covered by the project. The authors make it clear that it is not a ‘thorough investigation of the state of the art of prenatal screening’, but more detail on the availability and coverage of tests in each country would have been helpful.

The section on screening in the English health care system is very brief. While it is true that in England policies are determined locally, it would have been helpful to have an overview of the main screening tests usually available to women, and better still, some idea of the extent to which tests are offered and taken up. There is also no mention of the National Screening Committee and its antenatal subgroup, set up in England in 1996 to advise the government on all aspects of screening policy. The chapter does, however, highlight some of the differences between the four countries in terms of the political and legal framework for prenatal screening.

One of the challenges faced by the contributors to this book was to create a coherent picture from a diverse group of studies carried out in four very different countries. Meeting this challenge was made all the more difficult because most of these studies were not carried out in all four countries. The cultural differences between these countries are revealed in studies of the views of experts on prenatal screening and diagnosis and the attitudes, practices and opinions of midwives. In some areas, such as the views of physicians and women’s experiences of screening, studies were carried out in two or three countries. Other chapters, such as one exploring knowledge and understanding of prenatal diagnosis in Greek women waiting to have amniocentesis, and another on screening programmes in Finland, look in depth at one issue in one country. As a consequence, the book reads as a collection of separate studies where the cross-cultural differences are often much clearer than any unifying themes. A summarizing chapter bringing out some of these common themes and highlighting policy implications would have been very useful.

The social and ethical dimensions of prenatal screening...
are generally well covered by the research presented in this book. In some places it lacks the clinical and public health information which would provide a context for the views of staff and women. The inclusion of two chapters on the views of people living with conditions that are screened for prenatally is particularly valuable, emphasizing that those planning and providing prenatal screening must always be sensitive to individual differences in values and needs.

Rachel Rowe and Jo Garcia

Risk Management and Litigation in Obstetrics and Gynaecology
Edited by Roger V Clements
ISBN1 8531 480 6 (Hardback)

Although focusing primarily on obstetric and gynaecological practice, this book also details the very much wider issues that relate to risk management in these fields and to how the relevant legal frame work is organized and applied.

Hence, its first section which relates to the relevant law includes chapters on liability and causation in clinical negligence, consent, and expert evidence. The points made in all of the chapters in this section are as relevant to paediatricians as obstetricians whether or not they have an interest in medico-legal practice, given that this inevitably touches on pretty well all practitioners as part of their clinical work.

The second section of this volume deals with the principles of risk management and although these are applied to obstetrics their applicability goes beyond that specialty. The third section deals with obstetrics and the fourth with gynaecology.

There are very helpful chapters on prenatal screening and a chapter by Dear and Newell on the relation of cerebral palsy to intrapartum events. Dear and Newell have critically, and in admirably up-to-date fashion, looked at the relationship between intrapartum asphyxia and subsequent patterns of injury in term infants. It is disappointing, however, that space has not allowed them to deal similarly, even in summary fashion, with the problems of children born significantly preterm.

This book is well written and well produced. I would recommend that it should be available in both obstetric and neonatal units. It is also a useful reference work for individual practitioners who have an interest in obstetric gynaecological and paediatric medico-legal practice.

Lewis Rosenbloom