Book Reviews

Reducing the Risk of Cancers
Open University Individual Study Pack P578S, Milton Keynes: Open University, 1992.

How should an Open University course on 'Reducing the Risk of Cancer' best present its subject matter? It might do well to base itself on The Causes of Cancer by Doll and Petö. This course, seemingly intended mainly for those in health education, unfortunately does badly. The 'individual study pack' consists of two readers (200 pages each), two audio cassettes, an activity booklet (50 hours of activities) and a workbook. The course dispenses not only with Doll and Petö's book but with the analytical approach that the book fosters, and adopts what seems to be an increasing trend in contemporary education, sacrificing factual material for opinion, controversy and discussion. We listen, for example, to a 15-min consultation between 'Adam Forman', a general practitioner, and 'Pam', a professional woman (who lacks a surname), on Pam's eating habits ('make notes as you listen'). We do not ask whether the advice would reduce the risk of cancer, but we consider what techniques Adam uses to persuade Pam, the main features of his plan and how Pam is helped by Adam. Next we hear Adam and Pam talking separately about the useful points of the consultation, and finally we 'turn to our workbooks for feedback on this activity'.

Even if we accept such one-to-one consultations with healthy individuals as a realistic basis for preventing cancers it is difficult to envisage the facile approach of the course producing useful results. With such a large amount of material on the prevention of cancer the death of factual matter is alarming. There is scarcely more than a page on mammographic screening for breast cancer, no account of the trials, no estimate of the percentage reduction in breast cancer mortality that is likely to result from the National Screening Programme in Britain. With its inclination to activity and discussion rather than reading and study the course might encourage an informed discussion among its students on whether the reduction in breast cancer mortality justifies the costs of screening, and introduce formal means of addressing the issue. But the activities are superficial.

Much of the interest in the subject of preventing cancer is lost with the dilution of factual material. There is little on the wide variation in incidence of many cancers around the world, little on the genetics of cancer, little on theories of exponential cancer growth or how an apparently early detection of cancer may represent just one doubling time of a cancer that has experienced 50. Smoking gets more space, but the approach remains superficial and judgement gives way, even here, to a perceived need to present both sides of an argument; thus a 'case for tobacco' is presented, which includes the statement that 'the tobacco industry is philanthropic and generous'. There is a guide to monthly testicular self-examination, graphically illustrated but without discussion on the lack of evidence that it would reduce mortality. Consensus conferences are espoused rather than guidelines on how an individual might assess evidence. We are told of cancer-prone personality types, that emotionally suppressed women develop breast cancer and controlled, conforming, non-aggressive women develop gynaecological cancers, but the difficulties in making such conclusions from psychological assessments on cancer patients and controls are not discussed, nor the limited potential in prevention.

It is worrying to see the Open University trivialising an important subject that should enthuse and stimulate, but the trend is widespread, shared for example by some material produced on behalf of the Department of Health. The end result can only be to obfuscate the distinction between what has been proven and what has not, to invite cynicism on preventative measures and to weaken the impact of steps that individuals, society and governments can take to reduce the burden of cancers and other serious diseases.

M. Law

Therapy of Haemopoietic Neoplasia
Edited by E.J. Freireich & H. Kantarjian, New York: Marcel Dekker, 1991, 456 pp. $150.00.

This book is unequivocally out of the M.D. Anderson stable (14 out of the 15 authors are from there). That it is possible to write such a book from a single institution at all is a tribute to the tremendous contribution made there to cancer therapy during its relatively short 50 year existence. The book is a fitting statement of the M.D. Anderson philosophy of developmental therapeutics, central to which, it must be recorded, was the contribution over many years of Ken McCredie, who has now sadly died. It is also unequivocally a book for experts. There are no introductory concessions for the novice, so those unfamiliar with the meaning of '3+7' should proceed no further('clinicians' book).

The book is divided into 11 chapters covering the major haematopoietic disease groups - AML, MDS, ALL (adults only), CGL, CLL, myeloma, HCL, Hodgkin's and NHL and then two final chapters on supportive care and the management of infectious complications. All the chapters are written by acknowledged authorities in their field, and this is reflected in the wealth of experience recorded here that makes it a very much a practitioner's book.

There are some imbalances. ALL - never a favourite M.D. Anderson disease and the only chapter written by someone from out of town - takes up only 16 pages of text, whereas CGL takes up 70. The discussion of BMT in AML might be regarded by the connoisseur as reflecting traditional M.D. Anderson differences of opinion in this field, and to my mind underplays the role of BMT in AML. However, those of us who know and love the institution can forgive these little peccadillos, as a vast amount of useful information is presented throughout the book in a clear fashion. I particularly liked the use in some chapters of treatment guidelines for subgroups of disease and for certain regimens, for example when to use interferon as opposed to deoxycytomycin in HCL.

The most difficult area to discuss and present clearly is always NHL because of the heterogeneity of the disease. Fernando Cabanillas, however, has written an excellent account, although the mixture of Rappaport and Working Formulation short-hand terms may be confusing at first sight to UK and other European colleagues. I was surprised not to read more about the platinum/Ara-C combinations (another M.D. Anderson 'discovery') in this chapter, but was less surprised to see no mention of allografting at all!

Supportive care has also made an important impact, particularly during high-dose intensification; indeed, the original IBM cell separators were developed in conjunction with the M.D. Anderson team. Short sections within the chapter discuss blood product support, the management of tumour lysis, mucositis and the emerging role of growth factors. Infections are dealt with in an unusual way - by disease group and then again by site of infection, with a final section on prophylaxis.

The whole book is heavily referenced and has a good number of diagrams and illustrations to complement the text. I can agree with the editors that it represents the current 'state of the art' for treatment, though for how long remains to be seen. In conclusion, despite its price, I would strongly
recommend this book to clinicians actually involved in day-to-day therapeutic decisions for the treatment of haematological malignancies. It is a book to have on your shelf ready to hand and perhaps of less use to the general reader outside the immediate field.

C.H. Poynton

Atlas of Breast Cancer
Edited by Daniel E. Hayes, London: Mosby Europe Ltd, 1993, £70.00.

This atlas is perhaps unusual in providing such a broad resume of breast cancer, ranging from its biology and epidemiology, to diagnosis and management. Though its size precludes it from being fully comprehensive, the skilful use of diagrams to schematically convey principles and data has been employed to maximal effect. Any economy of words does not detract from meaning and factual content, and the book epitomises the edict that a diagram can often convey more than ‘a 1000 words’.

The diagrams are not only thoughtfully constructed to provide a pictorial representation of principles and concepts, but are also presented in a colourful and attractive form. In addition to superlative diagrams, the book also contains many colour photographs and radiological illustrations. The deliberately slim text is succinct, pertinent and up-to-date. Though in-depth discussion is not appropriate in this type of work, the authors manage to expound current opinion and knowledge and highlight controversial issues in a non-dogmatic style but one which alludes to certain transatlantic differences of both practice and philosophy.

The book consists of 12 chapters, of which those on mammography and radiotherapy techniques constitute the largest and most detailed sections. The latter includes criteria for selection of patients for conservative surgery and discusses the relevance of compromised surgical margins and the increasing emphasis being placed on extensive intraductal carcinoma (EIC) changes as a predictor of recurrence. The conservative option is championed, but no mention is made of psychological morbidity being similar in patients undergoing either conservative surgery or mastectomy. Furthermore, it is implied that cosmesis following conservative surgery does not deteriorate beyond a period of 3 years.

The introductory chapter emphasises the heterogeneity of breast cancer and how heredity and environment combine to produce multiple genetic changes varying from one individual to another, hence leading to a spectrum of clinical phenotypes. This has tended to undermine successful and consensual treatment policies. This chapter also elegantly illustrates the shift from the centrifugal theory of spread of breast cancer to one of biological predeterminism, with the concomitant increasing use of adjuvant therapy.

The section on epidemiology and development of breast cancer concentrates on the newer biology rather than ponderous epidemiological data. It is quite commendable that a book of this size should contain such a clear and enlightening section on oncogenes and carcinogenesis – the diagrams are superior to many of those found in more specialist molecular biological texts. These concepts may best be represented schematically at this introductory level.

It is evident from the section on surgical management that our American colleagues place much less confidence in FNAC than is the case here in the UK. An incisional biopsy is advocated for T2 lesions, which clearly then necessitates a further definitive procedure. When a tumour (T0 or T1) is EIC positive, then either a ‘wider excision’ or a mastectomy is performed, depending on patient choice. For those undergoing mastectomy, the option of immediate reconstruction is usually offered using either (a) silicon implant, (b) latissimus dorsi flap (LD) with or without implant or (c) transverse rectus abdominis (TRAM) flap. There is no mention of delayed reconstruction; some patients adjust to their mastectomy and are content with an external prosthesis. Perhaps as an expression of a ‘can do’ society, American women are more likely to expect and accept primary immediate reconstruction (as well as screening mammography).

The sections on pathology and benign breast disease are well written and vividly illustrated. The various forms of DCIS (comedo, cribriform, micropapillary, papillary and solid) are especially well described, though the text on ‘fibrocystic disease’ might have benefited from inclusion of the term ‘ANDI’ (abnormalities of normal development and involution) in place of ‘physiological alterations’.

For women aged 40–50 years, screening mammography every 1–2 years is recommended – in accordance with policy of the American Cancer Society. However, a recent Swedish overview of trials showed a non-significant reduction in relative risk, while other trials have revealed an excess of mortality from screening within this age group. A recent publication in the British Medical Journal (4 December) concludes that these discrepancies of clinical practice may to some extent reflect intercontinental cultural differences. In the face of accumulating evidence of no significant benefit (Journal of the American Medical Association, 24 November), screening within this particular age group may soon be abandoned in the USA.

Similarly, the sections on systemic and adjuvant therapy reflect the views of the American Consensus Conference. The principles of such therapies are thoroughly enunciated, but management policy does not coincide entirely with British practice. In particular, it is questioned whether node-negative, ER-negative women over 50 years should receive adjuvant tamoxifen, and whether adjuvant therapy should be given to node-negative women under 50 years irrespective of ER status. No comments are made regarding a subgroup of premenopausal node-negative patients with relatively large, poorly differentiated tumours who probably should receive some form of adjuvant therapy. Possible benefits of combined chemoendocrine therapy in patients over 50 years are not mentioned. The authors illustrate the difference between relative and absolute benefits of adjuvant treatment, thus emphasising how a significant proportion of those receiving this form of therapy have a low risk of relapse and therefore actually achieve rather small absolute benefits. A British text would probably have singled out the 11% of patients with primary breast cancer whose survival is similar to an age-matched control population – this group are unlikely to benefit from adjuvant therapy.

The only notable omission from this atlas is a ‘quality of life’ section, despite the emergence of psycho-oncology as an important subspecialty on both sides of the Atlantic.

Notwithstanding the above comments, this is an excellent and timely Atlas of Breast Cancer which should be of use to a wide range of readers, including those studying for both under- and post-graduate exams (for whom the brevity and of the text and clarity of the diagrams will be much appreciated). Breast cancer has developed into a complex multi-disciplinary specialty with an enormous literature base. It is refreshing and delightful to encounter such a concise yet authoritative book on this subject.

J.R. Benson
M. Baum