Get Through Accident and Emergency Medicine. Amy Herlihy. Royal Society of Medicine Press, London. October 2006. 140pp. £22.50. ISBN: 1853156949

Most MRCP and MRCS Part 1 candidates would be advised to invest in a Sainsbury’s shopping trolley if they decide to venture to their local university bookshop in pursuit of a relevant MCQs textbook. The shelves of these stores creak from the burden of the wide selection of texts. The unfortunate MCEM / MRCS A&E candidate will be left with growing anxiety and the knowledge that there are very few suitable MCQs textbooks. “Get Through” aims to bridge this gap and help you prepare for your exams.

The book covers a wide range of topics, from paediatrics to toxicology, and the book’s strength lies in its relevance to day to day practice. The various questions address many clinical scenarios we come across on run-of-the-mill, shop-floor work. The book’s stated main focus is revision for Part 1 examinations, however the MCEM part 1 syllabus is heavily based in the realms of anatomy, patho-physiology, microbiology, biochemistry, etc., with only 5 out of a possible 50 questions relating to clinical medicine. The book does try to address this imbalance with a chapter on anatomy, however it is gone. Not just dead and dissected but by page 41 of 226, his presence left this scene of time; or at the very least the pages of this book. And guess what comes next?

Let us begin with the ulcer, which takes up the introductory chapters of the book. I confess that I had limited knowledge of Napoleon’s predicament prior to this review and I have emerged much the wiser (or at least better informed). However, not for the last time in this review process, I found myself confused. Was I reading a detective story requiring a solution? Or was it being presented as a clinical case history for medical analysis? Or was it a fantasy based on speculation? I struggled to know which role the author wanted it to fulfil. What I did enjoy in these early chapters was the information conveyed about the state of knowledge at that time regarding ulcer disease. They did not have to worry about breath tests and helicobacter pylori.

Just as I was engaging with Napoleon and finding myself speculating about whether or not he had H. pylori, Napoleon is gone. Not just dead and dissected but by page 41 of 226, his presence left this scene of time; or at the very least the pages of this book. And guess what comes next?

One turns over the page anticipating more on Napoleon or perhaps his doctor (who is to feature later), or some treatise on famous gastric ulcers or anything but the menopause. The menopause? Yet that is the non-sequitur that “sequiturs”. Hence the second question I have with this book: What is its purpose? How does it hang together? What is the common thread? Where are we going? (Four questions, I know…) But back to the story of the menopause. Here we find such useful comments from history as “woman is a pair of ovaries with a human attached” (Virchow) and Galen’s view that menses were simply the natural blood-letting necessitated by overeating. Here we begin to see the virtue of the book. It is a book full of quotes and anecdotes to be used in appropriate circumstances, dropped into the conversation to impress the dinner party, thrown out in lectures to medical students to maintain interest.

If you were looking for an unusual angle on your chosen field of medical expertise, the chances are you will find it in this book. Provided of course your chosen field is one of the eclectic topics covered within it. Having said that, it is hard to envisage the use of either of the above quotations in any circumstance that would not result in a lynching of the utterer.

However the fact that Roman sailors only cut their hair during any circumstance that would not result in a lynching of the utterer.

For an enjoyable historical read, the chapter on Larrey is the most enlightening. In this chapter a historical tale is told that engages the reader and leaves him admiring a multi-talented but flawed man. That is a good “medico-historical” chapter that fulfils the promise of the book’s subtitle. However that chapter only highlights my third question: Is this book really “medico-historical” as it claims? Chapters such as those on blood have more to do with mythology than history. Other chapters on hair, death and transplantation lean towards psycho-analysis and philosophy. Mind you, I am still not sure about the castration complex and its link with hair.

I can tolerate psychology, I enjoy history and I love mythology but I keep coming back to the question now burning into my...