The childhood environment and adult disease. Ed by G. R. Block and J. Whelan. John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 1991. 243pp. £39.50.

A Ciba Symposium was the ideal format for this topic which is of compelling interest to any thinking clinician or biological scientist and which should also catch the attention of other professionals, including politicians, with responsibilities for human welfare. Dr Barker and the editors were bold in the spectrum of topics reviewed in 12 papers, each followed by a detailed discussion involving all 26 participants.

There were two broad themes: the neuro/psychological and nutritional/infective. An epidemiological approach was used for the common killers: coronary heart disease (D. J. P. Barker) and chronic bronchitis/ emphysema (C. N. Martyn). Whilst childhood pulmonary infection is an easily understood marker for adult lung damage, other associations considered by Martyn were less obvious. For example, current patterns of motor neurone diseases mirror the epidemiology of polio virus infection 40 years ago—are the two connected? Barker’s description of association between patterns of infant nutrition and growth with subsequent liability to adult cardiovascular disease was nicely complemented by the account of long term animal experiments on the programming of cholesterol metabolism (G. E. Mott et al) from which it was clear that genetically determined metabolic patterns were as important aetologically as pre- or post-weaning diet in the build up to atheroma. A. Lucas reviewed the association between early nutritional patterns and later disease and development by reference to his multicentre preterm feeding study. He reported that the early use of cow’s milk formulae for infants from families with an atopic history had a strong effect on their subsequent liability to eczema and wheezing. This long term cohort study has produced a string of positive and sometimes provocative associations. The subsequent discussion, particularly by J. Dobbing, drew attention to details of experimental design which need repeated scrutiny. An inherent problem facing the workers using large cohorts is the difficulty of obtaining independent confirmation of experimental results. A plausible advocate will convince his peers most of the time but until the data base is available for independent scrutiny and alternative analysis, the conclusions remain taken on trust. R. K. Chandra extended the discussion by reviewing the effects of early nutrition on immunological development, a subject of immense global importance.

The editors deserve praise for their work in producing a smooth flowing pithy discussion in which the contributors were quick to point out complexities of interpretation of any proposed mechanism. In addition to the now classical concept of vulnerable periods of neuronal development we were asked to consider how the plane of cellular nutrition could modulate the pattern and tempo of genetic expression, the ontogenesis of hormonal secretion or the selection of immunological clones. The neuropsychologists pointed out how changes in postnatal feeding practice had as great a mother-child behavioural component as a nutritional one, and the epidemiologists were at pains to show any possible aetiological factor might be no more than a marker acting as proxy for a cluster of adverse effects. Poor nutrition is associated with low socio-economic status, increased risk of contagion and bad adult habits such as smoking. A field day for debate, but not for clear conclusions.

In the neuropsychological papers J. L. Smart brought critical periods in brain development up to date as did C. Blakemore for the visual system. Both topics are more familiar to me and probably other paediatricians than the last group of four papers in which the long term effects of psychosocial childhood stresses were reviewed. I found the papers on adult emotional reactivity in rhesus monkey subjected to early stress (S. J. Suomi) fascinating, in particular the observation that there was a dichotomy of nursing behaviour among adult females deprived in infancy. The majority rejected the baby, but a minority did not, and those who accepted the baby did as well as non-deprived mothers: another genetic effect? Extrapolation across species is frowned upon, but why otherwise were the experiments planned in the first place?

This book is pertinent to all branches of the biological sciences and parts of it to the humanities. It deserves a place in every academic library as well as a hospital. Only a dull soul will fail to find something that will stimulate the intellectual curiosity.

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Advances in internal medicine. Ed by Gene H. Stoller- man. Mosby Year Book Inc., Chicago, 1991. 506pp. £43.50.

The editors of Advances in internal medicine have made an interesting choice of topic for the 36th volume. Four of the 18 chapters deal with infections, including the use of quinclones, antibacterial host factors in the urinary tract, candida oesophagitis and the toxic shock syndrome (TSS). The review of menstrual and non-menstrual TSS by Friedman and Beer is of the highest standard and reminds us of the wide variety of clinical and haematological manifestations of this severe disorder. Mention is also made of the toxic streptococcal syndrome and emphasis is placed upon the fact that TSS is essentially a clinical diagnosis. Candida oesophagitis is assuming greater importance in clinical medicine because of the frequency with which it is encountered in patients with AIDS. The review by Haulk and Sugar is concise, clear, and provides precise guidance for treatment. A. T. Fojo provides a section on the phenomenon of multidrug resistance which can be a major limitation to the effective treatment of cancer with chemotherapeutic agents. P-glycoprotein