Book Review

Clinical Dermatology: Diagnosis and Therapy of Common Skin Diseases by P. Vasarinsh. Butterworth, Boston and London, 1983. Price £45.

In the English language there are two superb massive textbooks of dermatology, one British and one American, for the dermatologist in training and practice and as a reference source for others. At the other end of the spectrum there is a plethora of small slim elementary texts for medical students, which are also useful for house physicians and even those preparing for the MRCP examination. These latter books are supplemented by a number of colour atlases of skin disease, which are usually accompanied by a rudimentary text.

Dr Vasarinsh's book is different. It is a book for family practitioners, paediatricians and general physicians (internists) who do not have access to a dermatologist in the adjacent suite of the hospital out-patient department or in an office or hospital in the same town, or even in any town or city within a few hundred miles. In other words, this is a book for doctors who have had no postgraduate dermatological training who find themselves compelled to look after patients presenting with skin disease. Clearly, in the UK, which is small and has a highly developed NHS network of dermatological services, few practitioners are in this position. But in Canada, where Dr Vasarinsh practises and teaches, in much of the USA, in extensive English-speaking parts of Africa, the Indian sub-continent and South East Asia, many, if not most, generalists find themselves in this situation and have in general been badly served by the (predominantly teaching hospital) dermatologists who spew out books of all sizes.

Dr Vasarinsh's book is substantial, over 700 pages, printed on good paper, hardbacked and not too closely packed. It will stand thousands of short journeys from the bookshelf to the knee and back again and survive until another edition replaces it. To the dermatologist it is simplistic, even naive. It is bread-and-butter dermatology. But if the reviewer were a family practitioner in Bute, Montana, or, flitting across the world, in Ooty with relics of the Raj in the waiting room, this book would rank with those other basic and precious volumes on which the isolated physician depends.

The sense of perspective is impressive. Many pages are devoted to detailed consideration of the commonest dermatoses in all their atypical and typical aspects. Differential diagnosis is emphasised and highlighted in short lists in windows of contrasting shade to help rapid identification and reference. Therapeutic advice is detailed and comprehensive. Dr Vasarinsh provides answers to the questions patients will ask. The fact that they are not always the right answers does not matter. They will do; they are sensible and safe.

The book is amply illustrated but only with black and white photographs. Now that colour reproduction has become much cheaper, one hopes that a future edition can include a colour atlas. Monochrome illustrations are useless to the reader whose dermatological mind's eye is innocent. A general practitioner friend to whom I showed this volume found only one in six of the photographs of any value.

One could make scores of minor criticisms, but they are irrelevant. Much more attention to the use of anthralin in psoriasis would be useful. Of the main ones, the pharmacopoeia is too orientated to North American trade names. It would be a very useful addition if a future edition could be internationalised from the therapeutic point of view.

Harvey Baker