Book reviews

Inherited Susceptibility to Cancer: Clinical, Predictive and Ethical Perspectives

Edited by William D Foulkes and Shirley V Hodgson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, 456 pages, £60.00.

There has been much debate over recent years about the impact that research in the field of genetics and progress in the human genome project will make on clinical practice. In many areas the discussion is still very much theoretical, since although there have been interesting research developments these have generally not been transferable to the clinical setting. However, in the field of cancer genetics, in particular in familial cancers, there have been considerable changes to clinical practice as research findings over the past decade have been implemented. The inheritance of germline mutations in cancer-predisposing genes explains only a small proportion of all cancers but is a considerable cause of mortality and morbidity. For some of these genes, testing is now possible so that people from "cancer families" can be advised whether or not they have inherited a high risk of cancer. This sort of information obviously carries clinical implications as well as ethical and moral implications and it is this overall package that the book aims to address.

The editors have gathered together an impressive list of 30 different contributors and have organised the book into two sections: part one covers the ethical, legal and social issues and the counselling aspects involved in this area, as well as the technical aspects of mutation detection. The second part goes through the hereditary contribution to cancer in an anatomical site-

specific way. This section is rounded off by a chapter on "late-breaking developments", a necessary chapter since this is such a rapidly evolving field; indeed some of the information in the chapters is already out of date and in general references are pre-1996.

The authors state that the book is not intended as a textbook for a cancer genetics course but do not specifically outline who they expect their main readership to be; presumably those professionals already working in the field who want more background information. This the book does provide, although there is some inevitable overlap with so many contributors and there is sometimes a different emphasis, depending on where the contributor comes from.

For example, the chapter on ethical and legal perspectives focuses on the situation in the USA, whilst the chapter on cancer genetics in primary care clearly focuses on the situation in the UK. Since there are significant differences between both health care provision and legal issues in the USA and the UK the reader is left with some gaps in knowledge.

The second section provides a useful summary of the latest research findings for different familial cancers. Thus from a clinical geneticist's point of view this will be a useful book to turn to if confronted with a family history of say, a particular endocrine tumour. Although the book is perhaps less useful if one wanted to obtain a grounding in ethical principles it does provide a good summary of these aspects as well as of the clinical, legal, social and practical issues of cancer genetics that a practising cancer geneticist may need. Rather than needing to turn to several different texts, the cancer geneticist will find most of the issues relevant to clinical practice summarised here in one book.

DR ANNEKE LUCASSEN

*Consultant and Honorary Senior Lecturer
in Clinical Genetics
Department of Clinical Genetics
Churchill Hospital, Oxford*

Medico-legal Aspects of Reproduction and Parenthood

J K Mason, Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1998, 398 pages, £60 (hb), £25(pb).

John Kenyon Mason is a forensic pathologist who has also attained the distinction of a doctorate of law. Thus, the reader will not be surprised that the subject matter covered is a diverse range of legal, medical and ethical issues surrounding reproduction and the parental relationship with the resultant child. The text is extensively referenced. However, the ethical component could be described as somewhat of a gloss - the book is heavily weighted with medical and legal fact. This is not a criticism, as the title does not promise to deliver a substantial text on moral philosophy.

The object of this revised edition has been to update the first edition. However, the medical law and ethical thinking of seven years ago has not been ignored by Mason, but rather used to highlight the significance of recent changes in medical law and ethics and to support his proposals for the future. This approach is to be commended as we must understand from whence we have come in order to proceed forward in an effective manner. The first two chapters are of historical and legal interest as are the last two chapters. These will be of interest to lawyers and social welfare professionals, respectively. However, the purpose of this review will be to focus upon the medical ethics content of this work.

This book, as a text on medical ethics, will be of value to the person interested in the medical ethics of human reproduction but as it covers most aspects of the subject it fails to provide deep analysis. Mason reviews the familiar dilemmas created by the availability of contraception and steri-