Inherited Susceptibility to Cancer: Clinical, Predictive and Ethical Perspectives


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chapter since this is such a rapidly evolving field; indeed some of the information in the chapters is already out of date and in general references are pre-1996.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


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-
Treatting Eating Disorders: Ethical, Legal and Personal Issues


This is a thought-provoking book which considers the ethical, legal and personal issues involved in the treatment of eating disorders. The book tackles these issues from three different angles: firstly, the clinician’s responsibility to act ethically and competently, secondly, the patient’s competence with respect to compulsory treatment, and finally, the role of society in providing the right context for ethical management of eating disorders. The contributors are specialists in eating disorders with considerable experience in these areas. Excellent references are provided at the end of each chapter.

Chapter one highlights the paradoxes in treating eating disorders and the range of feelings experienced by the therapist. The dual and often conflicting responsibilities to treat the patient’s illness effectively and to respect the patient’s autonomy, wishes and values are well portrayed. In chapter two the authors suggest that therapists have an ethical responsibility to understand both patients’ and their own personal feelings. Two chapters deal with the issue of gender and its influence on therapy. This issue is brought to life by a personal account of the experience of being a male therapist treating women with eating disorders. The ethical issue of how to engage patients while maintaining good professional boundaries is discussed, highlighting the importance of supervision. The writer emphasises the need for therapists to understand the influence of their own family of origin as well as their attitudes to male and female roles and relationships.

Three chapters deal with the contentious issue of compulsory treatment. Chapter six provides a balanced account of the dilemmas in choosing a path between a paternalistic or utilitarian approach and a more libertarian approach. The ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice and utility are well argued in respect and the view is put forward that in certain cases compulsory treatment is not a threat but a right. There is a consideration of how compulsory treatment should be implemented, pointing out the inconsistencies in legislation between and within countries. The need for more standardised ethical guidelines and procedures is noted. The following chapter discusses more generally the legality of forced feeding in a range of situations, including hunger-strikes in prison. The issue of competence to consent is touched on but I would like to have seen more discussion regarding the difficulties in assessing competence in people with eating disorders. There is some mention of consent to treatment in minors, highlighting the anomalies in the law. However, considering that many patients with eating disorders are under the age of 18, the dilemmas raised by the treatment of minors are perhaps not explored enough.

In chapter eight the writer argues against compulsory treatment for anorexia nervosa. He emphasises the importance of understanding the needs and wishes of patients, stating that treatment contrary to patient’s wishes may not satisfy the principle of beneficence and is almost always unethical. Limited knowledge of the outcome of compulsory treatment is cited as another reason for being very cautious about this approach. The writer also emphasises the possible change in consent over time and the need to disentangle coercion from compulsion. Alternatives to compulsory treatment such as engaging the