CORRESPONDENCE

EYE DISEASES IN AFRICAN CHILDREN

To the Editorial Committee of the British Journal of Ophthalmology

Sirs,—With reference to D. S. McLaren's interesting letter (British Journal of Ophthalmology, 1959, 43, 62), where he criticises that part of my paper on "Eye diseases in African Children" which is concerned with the nature of the ocular manifestations of avitaminosis A, I do not think he has altogether appreciated the general nature of that paper. It was never intended to be anything other than what the title suggests. Supporting data were deliberately withheld. It seems to me that some of Dr. McLaren's statements, moreover, parallel mine in their arbitrariness! Nevertheless, I sympathise with him. There is no doubt that the exasperation which this subject induces in us all is due to our lack of knowledge, a lack which no text-book admits or suggests. With this in view I have spent the last 18 months in India with six colleagues working on a 12-point programme the theme of which was "Vitamin A and ocular health". The most important of the papers now ready for publication is entitled "Re-assessment of the Ocular Manifestations of Avitaminosis A". Here most, if not all, the points raised by Dr. McLaren receive careful attention. In fairness to my earlier African paper, the findings in India largely confirm those in Africa, strengthening the claim of the former to be an important document.

Yours faithfully,

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Larchdown Farm,
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BOOK REVIEWS


After a careful perusal of this book the reviewer felt impelled to turn back to the author's preface to try to find out why it was written. From this we learn that the first half is a synopsis of the essential basic scientific facts as required for board examinations, while the second or clinical section is said to contain a collection of useful diagnostic and
therapeutic information condensed from leading text-books, journals, and the author's own lecture notes. It is thus apparently intended to be a quick practical reference book. This is all to the good, for to the student learning ophthalmology one must say straight away that it is quite valueless; written as it is in condensed form, the lack of balance in space devoted to rare conditions (e.g. "Three cases have been reported in the U.S."—page 185. "Has not been seen in the U.S."—page 188) compared with the synoptic and unfortunately not always accurate tabulation of the symptoms, signs, and treatment of common diseases would present to the tyro an unfortunate introduction to his life's work.

One would like to go on to say that the work is indeed of value to the established clinician and teacher as a reference volume, but one is unhappily in no position to do so honestly, since from his more experienced point of view the lack of balance is again all too obtrusive. Pathology is compressed into 4 pages, of which one is devoted to the classification of malignant melanomata with specious mortality rates over unspecified periods. The section on optics (48 pages) is good but too long for a book of this size. That on neuro-ophthalmology (52 pages) is comprehensive but so condensed as to prove only verification of the signs and symptoms of diseases which have already been diagnosed. Glaucoma achieves mention only in a tabulated differential diagnosis between its acute form, conjunctivitis, and iritis, and in the treatment of acute glaucoma acetazolamide is not even mentioned. The chapters on physiology and biochemistry are, to say the least of it, naive.

Very few references are given, and those only in parenthesis in the text, and it does not inspire confidence to find, for example, that the only reference given for ocular onchocerciasis is dated 1934; this may well be a classic, but surely something more useful has appeared since then.

Dismal to relate, this is not all. As examples, on page 31 it is stated that there are about 7 M. cones each of which is associated with a separate fibre in the optic pathway; this is difficult to reconcile with page 60 where we learn that the number of fibres in the optic nerve is 500,000 or more. The "or more" is admittedly an escape clause, but would appear a masterpiece of understatement if the earlier assertion be correct. On page 82 it is stated that the endothelium is impermeable to electrolytes, but by page 93 the author has changed his mind. On page 169 it is said that "any antibiotic" is suitable for the treatment of staphylococcal ophthalmia neonatorum. With luck this may well be true, but cultures and sensitivity tests fail to achieve mention here or elsewhere.

Although well produced, the proof-reading leaves much to be desired—visible, stereopsis, and the like. Charity is even further strained by meeting old and revered friends under the guise of Zeiss (glands of), Pannum, Guarneri, Bechet, Coat, and Eale; while even allowing for the mutually respected differences in transatlantic orthography, surely it is a little unusual to find the ora serrata persistently described as the orra serrata, even in the index. The reviewer is left with a slight feeling of lack of confidence and still in doubt.


This small book, as we are told in its preface, is intended to provide, in fairly simple language, a guide to the care and precautions necessary to maintain good eyesight. Any attempt to simplify a scientific subject, whether for the layman or for a more limited group of readers with an elementary scientific education, is apt to sacrifice accuracy to simplicity. Unfortunately, this book is no exception.

The descriptions of the anatomy and physiology of the eye are correct as far as they go, but are inadequate to interest the intelligent reader, and are of no real help in understanding what can be done to preserve good vision. With regard to eye diseases and their treatment, the simplification is such that almost every section contains a statement which
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is either misleading or not in keeping with modern teaching; any attempt to proffer constructive criticism of individual defects would involve an analysis of the entire section.

The social problem of blindness and the prevention of industrial eye injuries and diseases, as one would expect in the light of the editor’s qualifications, are dealt with adequately. The final chapter on the care of the eyes would not elicit the sympathy of many ophthalmic surgeons, however, and could easily alarm the lay reader.

This small book cannot be said to be either scientific or popular and must surely have a very limited appeal.


The Department of Defense of the United States of America has issued a manual on Emergency War Surgery which is derived from a somewhat similar publication developed at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). The book deals with the care of casualties in forward areas from the battlefield to base hospitals, providing clear instructions regarding the general principles to be adopted in every kind of case, including not only wounds but injuries due to burns, cold, blast, chemicals, and radiation. The section dealing with the eye is excellent and sound in its teaching—essentially that forward surgery should be kept to a minimum except as it is necessary for the conservation of vision, major and specialized surgery being reserved for the evacuation areas. The book is of great value, not only as a manual for war or even for the purposes of civil defence, but as a guide to the many types of trauma met with in civilian life.


The letterpress of this book is typewriter script reproduced by the rototype method. The illustrations are, in the main, photographic, and many are so indistinct that they could convey very little to an inexperienced student. There is also evidence of mistakes in proof reading.

Some of the expressions used are a little confusing to an English oculist, as, for instance, “visualize”, meaning an ocular process as against a mental one; “internal hordeolum” including stye; “epiphora” not distinguished from lacrimation; and “embryotoxon” used to include arcus senilis.

The treatment suggested is sometimes sketchy and sometimes unbalanced. In corneal ulcer the use of antibiotics and steroids is emphasized but no mention is made of atropine. A certain naveté is displayed in the treatment of amblyopia ex anopsia, which is considered to be “simple, inexpensive, and effective”. This Nirvana is attained by occlusion.

In the treatment of squint the advantages of orthoptic exercises are mentioned, but there is no hint of the very grave dangers of inexpert treatment.

Not all would agree that baring of the blind spot is a very early sign of glaucoma, and one would have liked to have seen at least a passing mention of low-tension glaucoma.

The neurological section is good and the subject is lucidly explained. The fundus photographs are not helpful.

This is a book which has just missed being excellent.

NOTES

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR CLINICAL ELECTRORETINOGRAPHY

During the International Congress of Ophthalmology held in Brussels in September, 1958, an International Society for Clinical Electeorretinography (ISCERG) was organized. The objective of the Society is to promote work in clinical electrorretinography by preparing