

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Dreisbach's Handbook of Poisoning*

REFERENCE: True B-L, Dreisbach RH, editors. *Dreisbach's handbook of poisoning, prevention, diagnosis and treatment*. 13th ed. Parthenon Publishing, London, 2002, 696 pp, \$54.95.

This reference book is written most specifically for use by clinical toxicologists, physicians, residents, nurses and medical students in the diagnosis and treatment of poisoning. It has some value to forensic toxicologists and pathologists, however, because of the broad range of toxic agents covered and detailed summaries of adverse and toxic effects.

The book is organized into six sections, the first dealing with general considerations, including the prevention and emergency management of poisoning. It also contains a short discussion of medical and legal responsibilities of physicians with respect to suspected poisonings. The latter sections deal with specific classes of toxic agents divided by agricultural poisons, industrial hazards, household hazards, medicinal poisons and animal and plant hazards. Each of these latter sections contains monographs on classes of agents grouped more or less by their chemical and associated organ or human toxicity. A little less than half the book deals with drugs, making it a valuable resource for information about the toxicity of household and industrial chemicals not found in many of the traditional forensic toxicological resources.

Although it contains an eight-page section listing common poisoning symptoms and associated agents, the book is not organized so much to clinically diagnose the agent in specific poisoning cases, but to provide information about suspected agents in a given poisoning and how to treat the patient. It would have its greatest clinical use by a physician treating a patient known to have ingested a specific compound, and evaluating the severity of the intoxication by the appearance and severity of the listed symptoms. For the forensic toxicologist, its greatest value is in identifying the likely symptoms associated with a pattern of drug or poison ingestion derived from a toxicological analysis. This can often confirm scene findings or corroborate history from witnesses, and helps form the nexus between the toxicology data and the specific evidence in a given case.

The book contains little reference to blood or tissue drug or poison concentrations and their interpretation, although these resources exist elsewhere. In fact, under the "Laboratory findings" heading in the monographs, only findings from standard clinical tests such as BUN, hematocrit, microscopic urinalysis, which have little utility postmortem, and diagnostic procedures such as X-ray and ECG. This reflects the fact that most clinical toxicologists do not have toxicological data available to them on a sufficiently rapid basis to contribute to a stat diagnosis or a treatment plan.

Looking at some specific agents from recent cases, Sildenafil Citrate (Viagra[®]) is listed only in a table listing flushing, headache and fall in blood pressure as clinical findings. Similarly tramadol (Ultram[®]) is limited to a one line entry in a table. Looking for Citalopram directs the reader to a two-page monograph on SSRI's with some data on toxic doses survived, clinical findings, reference to serotonin syndrome discussed elsewhere, and a treatment plan. A section on dinitrophenol ran to two pages with useful information about its sources, its uses (weight loss), and its toxicity which matched well with the circumstances of the case. Sections on metals poisoning were similarly informative. The sections on plant and animal and insect poisons were instructive and offered information not readily available in other commonly used forensic textbooks.

The book contains a number of tables in the various sections with useful information on chemically related compounds, such as pharmacokinetics, tissue binding, volume of distribution, estimated lethal dose, exposure times, symptomatology, etc., although these data are not provided equally in all sections. Also useful is a table on toxicity associated with natural medicines, and herbal and dietary supplements, increasingly becoming an issue in forensic casework.

The book is well indexed with both common and proprietary names of drugs, and household, industrial and agricultural chemicals. It does not permit the identification of potentially toxic components of commercial household products by brand name.

In summary, this is a useful addition to the forensic toxicologist or pathologist's bookshelf, and has the greatest utility in cases involving non-drug poisons, and where there is some history of symptomatology to review or medical intervention with clinical laboratory data.

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