

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Paediatric Forensic Medicine & Pathology*

REFERENCE: Busuttill A, Keeling JW, editors. Paediatric forensic medicine & pathology. Edinburgh, UK: Hodddner Arnold Publishers, 2009, 504 pp.

Child abuse and suspicious child deaths are complicated and sensitive matters. The aim of this book, according to the editors, is “to furnish an authoritative, comprehensive text to assist practitioners of medicine and the law dealing with such cases in the appropriate interpretation of these matters and to enable clinical and pathologic findings to be presented in an unbiased and dispassionate manner so that the courts are able to better evaluate the specialist evidence put before them.”

There are 24 chapters with extensive references, a helpful list of abbreviations (three pages) at the beginning, 28 pages of forms, charts, and tables at the end, and suggested further reading at the end of most chapters. There are 20 contributors including the two editors.

The book is published in the United Kingdom with contributors mainly from Europe such that American readers may encounter unfamiliar terminology and units although these are generally easily understood or converted. The legal references are a balanced mixture of U.K. and U.S. cases.

There are scattered typos and misidentifications of tables or illustrations, but the true citation is generally reasonably obvious, and overall the mistakes do not significantly take away from the content. In the chapter on head and neck injuries, the reader may be overwhelmed by a five-page table of findings in multiple studies of accidental traumatic brain injury in children and a two-page flow chart of mechanisms of brain injuries.

The chapters that deal with clinical assessment, the investigation of suspected sexual abuse, specialized areas including radiology, hematology, toxicology, biochemical changes and ocular involvement, specific head and neck injuries, and a brief chapter on perinatal neuropathology are comprehensive and include issues such as social and professional ethical and legal obligations. All are well illustrated although in some instances a few more arrows on X-rays to indicate subtle findings or explanations on pictures of injuries would be helpful (such as “a bruise with a clear imprint of the instrument used” without indicating the instrument).

Chapter 7, The Death Scene Following the Sudden Death of a Child, was disappointingly brief especially considering the established importance of the death scene investigation.

Chapter 8 is not a “cookbook” for a pediatric autopsy examination. Pathologists will have to refer to standard texts for such information. It does however emphasize areas that need to be pursued with extra care and the need for fixation and retention of organs in some circumstances.

Three chapters (10, 11, and 12) together are a comprehensive study of causes of natural death in infants and children and emphasize, appropriately, that many of these examinations should be a collaboration between a forensic pathologist and an experienced perinatal pathologist. All are well illustrated and referenced.

The chapters which discuss head injury or death, asphyxial deaths, and accidental injuries specific to children are adequate but brief with no illustrations or photographs.

Chapter 18 includes descriptions of the pathophysiology of drowning victims including the findings associated with “wet” and “dry” drowning.

Chapter 19, Sudden Death of Children in Hospital, discusses the emotional and legal factors associated with investigating such deaths. It includes a useful one-page comprehensive list of tasks to perform before, during, and after the postmortem.

Chapter 20, Forensic DNA Profiling, focuses primarily on the use of DNA in paternity testing in addition to the identification of abandoned babies or fetal material.

Chapters 22 and 23 deal with dental issues including dental neglect, dental identification, bite marks, and dentists accused of child abuse.

The final chapter, written by the first editor (AB) discusses the expert witness and expert testimony. He artfully addresses the qualifications and ethics of an expert, his/her responsibility to the court, and the proffering of opinions. He addresses landmark cases both in the United States and United Kingdom and has several quotations from judges or case transcripts which are thought provoking.

In summary, although some chapters are stronger than others, this is a much-needed treatise on pediatric forensic pathology and medicine which will be useful to practicing forensic pathologists and clinicians and to those new to the field.

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