

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Age Estimation in the Living: The Practitioner's Guide*

REFERENCE: Black S, Aggrawal A, Payne-James J, editors. *Age estimation in the living: the practitioner's guide*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 299 pp.

Age estimation of living individuals is not a modern concept; however, requests to undertake this arduous task have gained increasing popularity in recent years. With the influx in demand comes a host of legal, practical, technical, and human rights considerations that must be taken into account before an approach is implemented. This book successfully articulates the breadth of these considerations by providing a holistic view into the multifaceted components of a living age estimation including social, mental, and physical perspectives.

Although not physically broken down in this manner, the book can be conceptually divided into three components: (i) an introductory section with chapters that discuss social, political, and legal aspects of living age estimation, (ii) a transition section that moves the discussion into physical considerations regarding the general principles of aging, and (iii) a final technical component that describes actual approaches to deriving estimates.

Social complexities surrounding the performance of living age estimations are thoroughly explored within the early chapters of the book. This includes topics such as why does it need to be performed, for whom is it required, and what are the legal and ethical responsibilities of those involved in forming the estimate. Multiple examples are described within the book in which the chronological age of an individual is required to determine an appropriate course of action or outcome to a situation. Because chronological age is such an important and well-documented feature in western society, the need to estimate age is generally restricted to those individuals coming from countries that lack such documentation or to those individuals who do not have access to their documentation. To fully appreciate the context of their situation, a chapter is dedicated to describing some of the barriers that immigrants, asylum seekers, and those with undocumented identity commonly face. World statistics regarding multiple aspects of immigration are also given. A subsequent chapter discusses some of the legal concerns of performing an age estimation on a living individual, mainly that of consent and confidentiality. While the chapter was written from a

perspective specific to the United Kingdom, legalities surrounding this topic are likely to differ from country to country.

Chapter discussions then begin to move toward the introduction of physical concepts. The processes of growth and development, two individual and separate events, are described while focusing on the inextricable relationship that exists between the two. A full continuum of life stages are described including intrauterine, birth and infancy, childhood, juvenile, adolescence, adult, and finally senescence. Factors influencing maturational variation such as the secular trend, sexual dimorphism and other genetic, demographic, and environmental factors are also discussed.

The latter half of the book focuses on the science behind the estimate. Four general approaches “the four pillars of age estimation” are described. This includes psychological evaluation as well as examination of the skeleton, dentition, and external soft tissues. Thorough investigation into the range of available techniques within each of the four components is provided. Areas that command future research have also been identified. Not surprisingly, most of the described methods within the skeletal and dental chapters are equivalent to those employed to estimate the age of deceased individuals; the difference being that radiographs, ultrasounds, or MRIs are required to undertake the analysis rather than the visual assessment of dry tooth or bone. In addition to examination techniques, a chapter dedicated to the statistics behind the estimate is also provided and strongly recommends the use of a likelihood ratio. The book concludes with an outline of the editors' personal recommendations within each of the four pillars.

According to the editors, the book is intended to “identify and explain the main approaches to age estimation in the living and to define when a parameter may be of value and to raise awareness of its limitations” (p. XV). I believe this goal was successfully achieved; however, it is my opinion that the content within this book actually exceeds the confines of this description. The inclusion of topics peripheral to deriving the estimate, such as the social and legal aspects, greatly widens the scope of this book. In summary, I recommend the book to those who would appreciate a holistic account of age estimation in the living or to those interested in furthering research in the area.

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