

CHAIRMAN: J. M. Robson

Chairman's Introduction

In this Symposium we are dealing with a series of drugs which is probably more important than any other in medicine. I refer not only to potent analgesics, but also to the minor analgesics. These are very important because they do much to make life easier for many people who suffer from ill health and various types of pain. I think it is true to say that until recently this group of substances was regarded as reasonably non-toxic, and they have been used on a tremendous scale, with that idea being more or less accepted. What has modified our attitude is the experience obtained with new drugs in the last decade. The organic chemist has produced many new compounds, which have been tested in animals and then in man, and a few have been accepted as therapeutic agents, but even after testing for long periods to the limit of possibilities in animals, and extensively in man, with more experience new toxic effects have been revealed. One can give many instances of this, but of course the thalidomide story is itself the best example.

This has made us more aware of the possibility that drugs which have been used for many years might have serious toxic effects, and the purpose of this symposium is to try and assess to what extent various drugs have potential toxic effects. As well as being concerned with the true assessment of these toxic effects, I think implied in our mandate is the question, if such is the case, should we do anything about it?