

## Book Review

### Chemically Induced Birth Defects

Second edition, revised and expanded

James L. Schardein

Published 1993 Marcel Dekker, Inc., New York

920 pages

ISBN 0 8247 8775 7 \$250.00

The practising obstetrician is from time to time faced with an anxious pregnant woman who has consumed a medication and is then worried that it may have damaged the foetus. Sometimes this will have been prescribed by a doctor unaware that she was pregnant; this adds the spectre of litigation. In most regions in the UK it is possible to ring a regional centre for advice; these are commonly attached to the 'poisons bureau' which gives information regarding overdoses. However, it is useful to have a volume at hand that can give one an immediate overview. Schardein has produced an excellent text for this purpose. Although not a doctor, he has been involved in toxicology and teratology research for over thirty years. Indeed, it is unlikely that a practising physician could find the time to put together such an impressive single author collection of data and description.

The first 59 pages is an excellent introduction to the principles of teratogenesis; this section alone contains 480 references. It is readable and generally clear, although a little contradictory in parts. For example, in relation to human growth retardation, Schardein quotes a 1981 definition as a birth weight less than 2500 g, which is in fact the definition of 'low birthweight', encompassing both babies that are small for gestational age, and preterm infants. However, he goes on to report a series of more recent papers (the latest being 1990) which correctly draw a distinction between growth retardation (failure to reach the growth potential of the individual, whatever their eventual

birthweight) and small for gestational age (commonly less than the tenth centile), which includes many small but normally grown babies and excludes a considerable number that are genuinely growth retarded. However, in the preface he laudably asks for readers to write in and correct any inaccuracies, so no doubt this small confusion will be corrected in the next edition.

The index for the main text seems comprehensive, and in using it in my own practice, I was always able to find at least a general comment and some more specific data and references about all the drugs and substances that I looked up (including, for example, vaccines). It is clearly not possible in a single volume which one can hope to lift, to provide an exhaustive list of data relating to each substance; for this one should properly refer to the manufacturer. However, this volume can be relied upon to produce a quick answer which can be amplified at leisure. Editorial comments are clinically appropriate; for example while pointing out the considerable teratogenic effect of quinine, it is emphasized that the effects of malaria are much worse. Similarly, while it is recommended that use of metronidazole in pregnancy be restricted, the clinician is reassured that 'if there is a risk, it must be minimal' (quoting a 1990 reference). The book rightly avoids the trap of making recommendations about clinical management, which must always be individualized. The small risk of teratogenicity with many drugs must be measured against the 2% average risk of foetal abnormality inherent in any pregnancy, and any consideration of termination of pregnancy must take into account the woman's age and likely subsequent fertility, her number of existing children, her social circumstances, and above all, her own personality and beliefs.

I am grateful to have this volume as an addition to my personal library; I would recommend it for departmental libraries, pharmacies and perinatologists.

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## Book Review

### The Pharmacology of Chinese Herbs

Kee Chang Huang

Published 1993 CRC Press, Inc., Boca Raton, FL

388 pages

ISBN 0 8493 4915 X £100.00

This book is a welcome source of information in English on some pharmacological aspects of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) herbs for readers who are not familiar with Chinese texts. It is a particularly timely introduction to the UK market in view of recent increased interest and discussion on the issue of whether Chinese herbal therapy is a friend or foe (The Lancet, vol 341, 13 February 1993).

The book is divided into three major sections, Section I (Introduction) and Section II (History of Chinese Medicine) consisting of 5 and 7 pages, respectively, which set the background behind TCM and give a brief history its practice and evolution by tracing recorded work on TCM from as early as the 22nd Century BC to the Ming-Ching Dynasties (1368-1911 AD). Under Nationalist Government rule (1911-1949) the Ministry of Health sought to eliminate TCM practice. After the communist revolution (1949) the People's Republic Government re-established the importance of TCM. More than 10

TCM colleges and research institutes were set up in the coastal provinces and the West China provinces, in particular Szechuan.

At present, most medical students in China's western-style medical universities are encouraged to take courses on TCM. The Cultural Revolution (1960-1976) brought Chinese culture and science, amongst other issues, to a standstill. Medical publications during this period were mainly submitted by untrained "barefoot" doctors and require close scrutiny. My personal experience, gained working with Chinese colleagues from the early 1980s, indicates that the practice of and scientific research on TCM has been encouraged in many well known academic institutes.

The author obviously has difficulties in choosing which herbs to include, which herbs are considered therapeutically valuable. He is also aware of complications in combination formulae and decided not to include them in the book.

In Section III, the author describes the chemistry, actions, therapeutic uses and toxicity of herbs based on their therapeutic values. The author comments that the values of these chosen TCM herbs have been analysed convincingly by modern scientific methods with references. There are altogether 39 chapters under Section III. The categories reviewed include herbs affecting the cardiovascular system (e.g. those with multiple actions, cardiac anti-arrhythmic, anti-hypertensive,