

Book Review

Paracetamol (Acetaminophen). A Critical Bibliographic Review

Laurie F. Prescott

Published 1996 Taylor & Francis, London x + 708 pages
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It is well over 70 years since paracetamol (acetaminophen in the United States and in other countries) was synthesized and shown to be a useful drug. Although not widely appreciated immediately, it eventually became the widely-used and versatile drug we know today. It does have a current reputation as being a toxic agent, but in fact paracetamol has a remarkably good safety record; the spate of reports on its toxicity is relatively recent in its long history. Professor Prescott, in the course of over thirty years in clinical pharmacology and toxicology has accumulated a vast store of knowledge (not to mention reference material) on all aspects of paracetamol and has put this to good use in the compilation of this volume. The subtitle is "A Critical Biography", which justifies the fact that more than one-third of the book is taken up with the reference section. This is not to say that Professor Prescott has managed to review every one of the 5,000 or so references cited, but the list is more than just a result of a computerized literature search, as all the references indeed arise from the well-organized text. Even where the reference may appear only as part of an exhaustive list (for example, in a table on reported cases of liver damage following paracetamol overdose) there is sufficient extra detail to set the data in the context of wider knowledge.

The value of the critical biographic approach to assessing the overall consensus of current thinking is illustrated in this book and Professor Prescott is not afraid to question literature

findings that may require reassessment. For example, it has been reported that paracetamol absorption is decreased in Behçet's syndrome, although there may have been a strong suspicion of non-compliance in the single (psychiatric) patient in whom the observation was made.

In other places, the author displays a careful approach to how various phrases are used by different people and how this can subsequently lead to erroneous conclusions. He takes to task some authorities who equate self-poisoning with attempted suicide in compiling statistics; I am not sure that would have grasped the distinction myself but this does indicate how wary one should be of conclusions that have not been subject to some critical analysis such as is contained in this book.

Paracetamol is now one of the most widely used drugs in the world, and because of this it has also been one of the most widely studied in many fields of pharmaceutical sciences, especially in toxicology, pharmacokinetics and drug metabolism. Apart from studies that point to ways of treatment of paracetamol poisoning, most of these studies have their greatest value outside of the immediate problems with paracetamol, the drug acting as a convenient, well-studied model for more fundamental studies. Thus, this book's comprehensive chapters on nephrotoxicity and hepatotoxicity extend far beyond the interests of paracetamol experts. Similarly, the separate chapters on absorption, distribution, metabolism, biliary excretion, renal excretion and pharmacokinetics bring together much of the fundamentals of these processes, with the critical comments providing a firm basis of a more thorough understanding of such phenomena. The present volume performs a great service in this direction.

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Bacterial Toxins and Virulence Factors in Disease (Handbook of Natural Toxins Volume 8)

Edited by Joel Moss, Barbara Iglewski, Mather Vaughn and Anthony T. Tu

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The Handbook of Natural Toxins is an unusual project in that, whereas most handbooks would be expected to be planned in advance with the various sections already well-defined, this handbook is more of a continuing series of research reviews. Thus the title of volume 8, "Bacterial Toxins and Virulence Factors in Disease", seems to refer to two separate aspects of natural toxins, rather than a complete exposition of the two together. The list of previous titles in the Handbook concludes with the statement that additional volumes are in preparation, but there is no list of forthcoming titles, reinforcing the view that the series is not intended as a completed treatise but is likely to be an open-ended series on natural toxins. The series editor, Anthony T Tu, stresses in the preface to the Handbook

that workers in one field of research will often miss important pieces of information in other fields and that the Handbook sets out to gather related information together. In this (and in the previous volumes) he has succeeded. However it is one of the hazards of compiling a multi-disciplinary handbook that the intended audience may well miss the nuggets because the title of the volume would not necessarily attract their attention. Would the title of Volume 8, for example, lead one to expect this book to contain the short, but excellent chapter on the three-dimensional structure of diphtheria toxins, or the chapter on delivery of vaccines in liposomes; this could of course be part of the Editor's intention—to bring these subjects to the notice of workers not normally exposed to them.

Much of the book is, in fact, concerned with structure and function and I did wonder if this should not have formed part of the title. However, those who do find their way to the book will find valuable sources of current thinking in this diverse and rapidly advancing subject.

JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN