

childhood onwards are minutely detailed and crystal clear. A prodigious memory was one of the gifts which contributed to his excellence as a physician and his charm as a companion.

Richard Bayliss's career developed in an era when those who aspire to a life in medicine were hand-picked and promoted to higher training posts on the basis of academic record, personality and breadth of interests. It is interesting to speculate how an individual of similar potential would fare in the current era of computerised selection and Modernising Medical Careers.

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This book certainly updates the generalist in an entertaining, readable way. It will be a popular, valuable, small book to have on the medical assessment unit to read in those rare quiet times. It will not completely replace discussion with a specialist colleague when one needs the current update on an uncommon medical problem but it will make the conversation more interactive.

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An insider's guide to the medical specialties

Edited by Ian Reckless, John Reynolds and Raghieb Ali.

Oxford University Press, New York 2006. 464 pp. \$39.50.

What a joy it was to read this book. I expected this volume, as implied by its title, to be full of lists and algorithms to educate the specialist physician needing to update on other disciplines encountered on the post-take ward round. This book does not disappoint and is full of facts, figures and knowledge in a refreshing form.

Each chapter has a pair of authors – one an established consultant, the other a trainee. They write about aspects of their specialty that they feel are important to the general acute physician. This enables physicians in another specialty to revise their existing knowledge and to learn about key advances that have taken place since the specialist studied for their Membership of the Royal Colleges of Physicians (MRCP) exam and read a much larger textbook with numerous lists and algorithms.

There are 21 short chapters in this portable book. The chapters on liaison psychiatry and obstetric medicine are of particular importance to the general physician. The latter contains paragraphs on medical problems in pregnancy, estimated radiation to the foetus from imaging studies and medical contraindications to pregnancy.

The chapters are variable in their depth of information and do depend on the reader having a background knowledge of medicine at MRCP level. The information is up to date and there are nuggets of specialty knowledge generally not available in the more conventional textbook. There is also sensible advice on tests such as the low positive antinuclear antibody in relation to connective tissue disease. Ignoring random positive tests is always difficult for any physician.

Each chapter is written in an entertaining way. The conversational tone of the text makes it more like a novel than a reference book. Headings such as 'Pop' relate to a lively few pages on spontaneous pneumothorax, followed on the next page by 'Whoops' relating to iatrogenic snags in the pleura. The chapter on pleural disease at last includes a comprehensible description of Light's criteria for pleural effusion.

Chapters are variable in their sense of humour and information, but there are numerous references, conveniently based at the bottom of the relevant page. The chapters have each been externally peer reviewed. The chapter on geriatric medicine is very informative, not only on the statistics of the 'demographic time bomb of our ageing population,' but also about common 'geriatric syndromes'.