Book review

Backache

Ian Macnab and John McCulloch, 2nd ed., 448 pages, Williams & Wilkins, Baltimore-Hong Kong-London-Sydney, 1990
ISBN 0-683-05352-3

The authors of this second edition of *Backache* (1st ed., 1977) state in their preface that they have aimed at writing a comprehensive, readable book on the principles of diagnosis and treatment of lumbar back pain for practitioners and orthopedists in training, as well as for spinal surgeons. In this difficult task to satisfy such a broad category of physicians and surgeons, the book has been divided into chapters embracing anatomy, clinical features, diagnostic investigations, and the sundry lesions giving rise to low-back pain. Since the first edition, new chapters on the relationship of back pain and disability, diagnostic investigations, and spinal canal and lateral zone stenosis have been added.

The introductory chapter on anatomy gives an adequate overview of the gross anatomic features of the lumbar vertebrae and of the surrounding soft tissues. Schematic drawings emphasize the features important for understanding the pathologic changes of clinical significance.

The clinical features are presented in chapters on taking the patient's history, conducting the physical examination of the back, and the link between low-back pain and patient disability. The last-mentioned subject is interestingly illustrated by delineations of different types of patients including reflections on the connection between backache, which is approaching epidemic proportions in Western countries (Editorial 1989), and socioeconomic factors.

All the contemporary diagnostic investigations are thoroughly presented, which is stimulating reading for orthopedists with a special interest in the lumbar spine, although these investigations might be too extensively discussed for other physicians. The enormous impact of computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) in a single decade on diagnostic possibilities, and thereby on the surgical management of spinal disorders, is well covered by comparison with the first edition.

Spinal trauma is the only major, specific lesion giving rise to low-back pain that is "stepmotherly" treated. The chapters on degenerative changes and nerve-root entrapment are very informative, though the partly simultaneous presentation of these entities could cause some distraction, especially to colleagues who are not well acquainted with these spinal problems. Indications for decompressive and stabilizing surgery are adequately discussed, whereas the presentation of operative techniques is cursory. The book is well illustrated as to how CT and MRI foster more precise surgery; the indications for spinal surgery have expanded far beyond those of the myelographic era.

The book ends with some thoughts on wrong patient selection and operative complications leading to spinal-surgery failures. Today, this is an ever-increasing problem, for we are still in the infancy of an era of expansive spinal surgery with all of its attendant and inherent risks of complications.

The goal of Macnab and McCulloch to present a readable account of the principles of diagnosis and treatment of low-back pain for a broad spectrum of physicians and surgeons perhaps has not been attained in this second edition, for there are some shortcomings, inevitable as they may be, that can be best summed up as varying degrees of too abundant and too meagre information on the various addressed topics. However, even with this in mind, the book is excellent complementary reading for all backache-interested colleagues from practitioners to spinal surgeons, and is highly recommended.

Reference

Editorial: The back pain epidemic. *Acta Orthop Scand* 1989; 60(6): 633–4.

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