Primary Care and Laboratory Medicine—Frequently Asked Questions

Stuart Smellie, Clodna McNulty and Mike Galloway. William Marshall and Beverly Harris (eds): ACB Venture Publications, 2010, 258 pp. ISBN 978-0-902429-46-8; price £35.00; available from the Association of Clinical Biochemists, 1300-132 Tooley St., London SE1 2TU, UK

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The National Health Services of the United Kingdom has estimated that 70–80% of all health care decisions affecting diagnosis or treatment involve a pathology investigation [1]. Yet, laboratory medicine, let alone clinical biochemistry, is not a part of the undergraduate medical curriculum of many medical schools.

The style of presentation of this book is unusual and may even be unique. It is written as answers to about 150 FAQs or frequently asked questions. The questions are preceded by a chapter on reference “ranges” (*sic*) and abnormal results. Subsequent chapters cover the most common areas of concern to the laboratory: allergy, arthritis and inflammation; anaemia; cancer; cardiovascular disease and hypertension; infection, diabetes; diarrhoea; drug safety and monitoring; gynaecology; infection; kidney function and electrolyte disorders; liver function tests; thrombosis and anticoagulation; and thyroid disorders. Each chapter is divided into sections in which the FAQs are found. The answer to each question is a summary of current thinking and ends with a succinct “point(s) to note” and a useful reading list.

While the coverage is comprehensive, there are the inevitable questions that those from outside the UK may wish to pose but which are not asked in the book. This is to be expected since FAQs will differ in various parts of the world. For example, the tests for dengue fever, a potentially fatal infection in many countries, are not presented

since it would be of less importance for a primary care doctor in the UK. While the usefulness of certain tests for screening is discussed, it may have also been helpful if a chapter on screening in the primary care setting, with its pros and cons, was included.

The preparation of this book has systematically involved all the major bodies in laboratory medicine, *inter alia*, the Royal College of Pathologists, the Royal College of General Practitioners, national associations of clinical biochemistry, medical microbiology and haematology. The guidance notes are the product of a wide-ranging consensus obtained with a well defined search strategy, rather than being the views of the authors alone. This is Level 4 evidence which is less robust than that based on randomised control trials because not many of these have been done in clinical biochemistry.

The intellectual challenge for laboratories is no longer just to produce good quality test results but, increasingly, to ensure the effective use of tests. Specialists in laboratories

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are now seen as an integral part of the health-care team. The authors are a chemical pathologist, a medical microbiologist and a haematologist, specialists who would cover three of the four major disciplines in a diagnostic laboratory. It is convenient that the common questions faced in each of these disciplines are discussed within a single volume. This book should be a useful update to anyone who either works in a clinical laboratory or uses its services.

Reference

1. Report of the Review of NHS Pathology Services in England, Department of Health Publication 275515, London, February 2006. Available from P.O. Box 777 London SE1 6XH or it is available from the Department of Health website. <http://www.dh.gov.uk/ab/Archive/IRNHSPS/index.htm?PageOperation=email> and <http://collections.europarchive.org/tna/20081105144224/http://www.thecarterreview.com/downloads/CarterReviewPathologyReport.pdf>. Accessed 18 July 2011