

BOOK REVIEW

“A REVIEW OF DISEASES IN MALAYSIA”

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As its title promises, this book is a review of diseases that occur in Malaysia. This rather unusual piece of work represents a true labour of love by the author, Dr Lim Kean Ghee, a surgeon in private practice. What Dr Lim has done is to attempt to search for, read through and cite every journal article written on diseases that occur in Malaysia. Reference to a few books have also been included. A remarkable feat indeed, even given that the task of compiling this second edition has been made somewhat easier by the internet. As expected, to be as comprehensive as possible, it would not be enough to use just PubMed or Google, but lots of cross-referencing and search of individual author's names are required. Not an easy undertaking for a single researcher!

The book is divided into three sections, with a total of 30 chapters. In section one, the opening chapter introduces Malaysia and its demography, and there are chapters on broad disease categories such as problems in pregnancy, genetic conditions, nutritional disorders, injuries and cancers. Section two concentrates on infections, including chapter headings such as rickettsia, spirochaetes, fungi, protozoa, worms and arthropods. Section three comprises two subgroups. The first subgroup consists of the “sense organs”, such as skin, eyes, ears, the nervous system and psychiatry. The second subgroup covers diseases of the “body functions”, with conventional headings such as the musculoskeletal, endocrine, cardiovascular, alimentary, urinary and reproductive systems. In each chapter, there is a short synopsis of each specific disease based on journal articles written on these diseases. References are provided in a standard format.

Why write such a book? In his preface, Dr Lim states that this work arose out of his own interest to know what to expect in clinical practice in Malaysia, i.e. know what diseases exist in his home country. I like his other reason better, namely: “for posterity”. To quote Dr Lim: “Fifty to hundred years from now, people might want to look back and find out what the situation with a particular disease was like in the twentieth century.” Personally, I feel that this book is already a valuable resource at this point of time, not only for our Malaysian cousins, but also for Singaporeans, as well as researchers from further afield wanting to learn more about diseases that occur in this part of the world.

Not unexpectedly, the Medical Journal of Malaysia is a major source of the material for this book. Articles by Malaysian authors published in many other regional and international journals, including the Singapore Medical Journal, have been abstracted. I am particularly fascinated with the ten chapters on infection. For example, how many doctors know that Demodex, a small wormlike mite, may infect the human face and may clinically be mistaken for a fungal infection? Or that *Listeria monocytogenes*, a Gram-positive bacteria, is not uncommonly found in fresh vegetables, beef and poultry in wet markets, and can also cause meningitis?

An obvious shortcoming of a book of this kind is that it cannot be expected to cover diseases comprehensively nor can it be expected to provide a balanced picture of the true disease pattern in Malaysia. But the reality is that common diseases are boring and we would rather read about the rare and interesting entities. This is reflected in what gets published in journals, with a definite slant towards publication of rarities. The author, Dr Lim, was being rather modest in stating that his book captures a snapshot of diseases in Malaysia – it is much more than just a snapshot but a detailed portrait to be savoured over the fullness of time and perhaps a brandy.

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