Infectious Diseases of the Fetus and Newborn Infant (5th edn)

Edited by J. S. Remington and J. O. Klein

When I was asked to review the latest edition of Infectious Diseases of the Fetus and Newborn Infant, I felt a little intimidated. ‘Remington and Klein’ has been a constant on the bookshelf of any pediatric infectious diseases physician for the past couple of decades. First published in 1976 and now in its fifth edition, this tome is usually the first point of call when any tricky questions arise about fetal or neonatal infections. Review ‘Remington and Klein’? May as well ask me to review The Bible.

So it took some willpower to open this edition in an objective frame of mind. In the preface, the editors state that the book is directed at those involved in clinical care, so I read it from the perspective of a clinician. After a while, a few things became clear. There is no doubt that this is the most authoritative text around on fetal and neonatal infections, that it contains the answer to almost any question about specific infections, and that a huge volume of information is presented in a very readable yet academic format. However, this textbook is not for everyone.

Remington and Klein have gathered an impressive group of contributors, each of whom is a world expert in his or her field. But reading through the list, the first limitation of the book becomes clear. Only three of the 56 contributors come from outside North America. As a result, the text is focused on problems that the North American clinician might encounter, and deals with them from a similar perspective. For example, in outlining recent changes in management of fetal and neonatal infections in the first chapter, the editors highlight the detrimental effects of the influence of insurance programs on patient management—clearly a warning to countries planning to expand the role of private health insurance, but presently a problem largely limited to the USA. In most chapters, the epidemiology sections deal substantially with data from the USA; for example, the syphilis chapter devotes only one small paragraph of its 3.5-page epidemiology section to countries other than the USA, which seems imbalanced for a disease whose major global burden is in developing countries. Having a North American focus is not a major problem for clinicians from most industrialized countries, where the epidemiology, clinical presentations and management options for these infections are likely to be similar. But clinicians in developing countries will find several chapters of the book frustrating for their lack of perspective in dealing with infections in settings of poverty, or tropical climates, or where diagnostic and treatment strategies are limited by cost and availability.

The book partly circumvents this with a superb chapter by Barbara Stoll, giving a global perspective on neonatal infections. Dr Stoll elegantly and comprehensively outlines the differing epidemiology of neonatal infections in developing and industrialized settings around the world, and manages to draw clear implications for management from the data. Other outstanding chapters from a clinical point of view include those on toxoplasmosis, group B streptococcal infections, laboratory aids to the diagnosis of neonatal sepsis, and the epidemiology and control of infections acquired in the nursery.

The book is organized by diagnosis and organism, rather than by syndrome or presenting features. In this way, it is an excellent reference for the clinician faced with a neonate with a confirmed or probable diagnosis, or for the specialist infectious diseases physician. However, a generalist who is presented with a child whose diagnosis is not clear may have trouble navigating this book. The introductory chapter provides some guidance, particularly in a number of tables outlining clinical features shared by the major fetal and neonatal pathogens. Some later chapters also have extensive differential diagnosis sections, but these will only be found by the reader who is already familiar with the book’s layout. I found it interesting that the introductory chapter, in which a clinical perspective is drawn and a syndromic approach taken, takes up only 23 pages, whereas the subsequent chapter—a detailed and theoretical account of the developmental immunology of the fetus and neonate—lasts 113 pages. From the clinician’s perspective, an expanded account of how to approach the diagnosis and management of the sick neonate with certain clinical features would have been useful.

Although a few of the photographic reproductions are poor, and some of the tables are confusing, the book is overall very clearly presented and easy to read. Each chapter is exhaustively referenced. The drawbacks do not negate the obvious strengths of this book as the best, most comprehensive text on infections of the fetus and neonate. It will remain on my bookshelf, and continue to be the first book I open when faced with a question about infections in this age group.

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It should become a classic in the field of infectious disease and the new field of perinatal medicine. Since it will undoubtedly be widely purchased and frequently consulted, it is fortunate that one can also compliment the editors on having produced an exceptionally readable reference book of unquestioned scientific merit. This book provides a critical review of contemporary information available regarding infection of the fetus and newborn with a wide variety of pathogenic agents. The editors have produced a work with scope and depth to make it of value to medical students, practicing physicians, microbiologists, and health-care workers.