

Book Reviews

Common Medical Problems in the Tropics

By C R Schull. 3rd ed., revised and updated. Oxford: Macmillan. 2009. ISBN 978-0-23003-104-3.

This book should be viewed in the context of its aims, i.e. as a reference for paramedical health workers in isolated rural areas with limited access to senior advice and even simple investigations. However, it would also be a valuable reference for doctors, particularly those who trained in high-resource settings or who are working outside their area of expertise. This edition is a major re-write by Dr Schull and his wife, who have generously agreed to forego royalties from sales. The book is available through Teaching Aids at Low Cost (TALC), thanks to a grant from the Australian Medical Association of Queensland Foundation.

The first chapter, 'On being an effective health worker', is a highlight that should not be skipped. Experience is often worth more than knowledge in medicine but is harder to obtain, and Dr Schull summarises his wealth of experience on difficult topics such as interactions with traditional healers and how to work together with other community leaders.

Most of the book is a comprehensive reference text, with chapters devoted to the major tropical diseases and a systematic approach by organ system. There are many practical points with helpful diagrams such as how to make a malaria film and a skin smear. Extensive photographs and diagrams illustrate the anatomy, examination techniques and pathology.

A possible flaw is the detail given to areas that commonly depend on national policies. For example, there is a detailed section on HIV with multiple regimens, indications and follow-up strategies. Most countries where antiretrovirals are available have extensive and slightly different guidelines, and it is the responsibility of the healthcare worker to become familiar with them. Also problematic is that some information is out of date owing to rapid changes as new data emerge.

This is a valuable reference text for the practising of healthcare in the tropics, and its scope extends well beyond the paramedical workers at whom it is principally aimed. The generosity of author and sponsors makes this important information available at low cost to those who most need it.

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Rethinking Aging: Growing Old and Living Well in an Overtreated Society

By Nortin M Hadler. Cape Town: UCT Press. 2011. ISBN 978-1-92049-996-9.

Defensive (and aggressive) medicine has led to the USA leading the world in the cost per capita of its medical care. In many aspects it leads the world in quality of care. Hadler, however, takes us through convincing evidence of the harms of overtreatment to individuals and society, and cost is by no means the only factor.

He challenges many beliefs that have become standard medical practice and advice on diverse topics such as weight (it's OK to be overweight – but not obese), exercise, diet and lifestyle. The use of statins, treatment of hypertension, coronary artery disease interventions, treatment of type 2 diabetes and many others come in for heavy criticism: '... commonly prescribed drugs, such as beta blockers, ACE inhibitors, and statins, are testimony to the American philosophy of "don't just stand there, do something," rather than evidence-based,

informed medical decision making'. Of screening tests (including breast, prostate and colon cancers) he concludes: 'unconscionable amount of overdiagnosis and overtreatment for such tenuous benefit'. He deals with 'the proclivity of American physicians to get imaging studies and the expectation of the American patient to be studied and to receive a "you're normal" report'. Hadler criticises what this has done to medical education and fears that medical practitioners, for financial and other reasons, are obliged to practise in this way.

While this book is based on medical practice in the USA, the themes are applicable in private medicine in South Africa (and, to a lesser extent, in the public sector). Hadler's compelling analysis of research is a sobering read for practitioners who may have become complacent and unquestioning in their practices, although some would accuse him of confirmation bias in his choice of literature and arguments.

This is an excellent book on ageing and the pitfalls of overdiagnosis and overtreatment, and is recommended to both health professionals and the lay public.

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Daily Drug Use

Edited by Leesette Turner. 9th ed. Cape Town: Cape Western Province Branch of the Pharmaceutical Society of South Africa. 2010. ISBN 978-0-620-46757-5.

This is the 9th edition of *Daily Drug Use*, published by the Western Cape Branch of the Pharmaceutical Society, the first edition having been published in 1981. I have been in general practice for many years, and am embarrassed to admit to not having used this book in the past.

The book is predominantly an almanac of drugs available in South Africa and lists all the potential drug interactions, plus the risks of drug use in pregnancy, breastfeeding and porphyria. It is clearly laid out, and both generic and brand names are used where possible. The book is a useful cross-reference if you have a patient who may be using one or more chronic medications and want to add another medication for acute or chronic use.

Currently, many patients are taking chronic medication prescribed by a variety of doctors for a range of problems such as hypertension, hyperlipidaemia, HIV disease and psychotropic conditions. Often these doctors do not communicate with one another, and they may therefore not be aware what prescription medications their patient is taking. Additionally, we are told that iatrogenic disease, including adverse drug reactions, occurs in more than 10% of patients.

With adverse outcomes increasingly leading to medical litigation, a prudent doctor needs to ask patients what other medicines they are taking and check in a reference source such as *Daily Drug Use* for possible interactions.

Unlike the *South African Medicines Formulary (SAMF)*, which should be on every doctor's desk, this book does not give the therapeutic indications or doses for drug use. It is, however, a useful adjunct to SAMF in helping to avoid problems arising from polypharmacy.

Daily Drug Use is a valuable reference text for pharmacists, particularly hospital pharmacists. It should be increasingly used by prescribing doctors who need to avoid problems of adverse drug reactions and interactions.

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