

*BOOK REVIEW*

UNDERSTANDING MEDICAL PHYSIOLOGY : A TEXTBOOK FOR MEDICAL STUDENTS. Edited by R. L. BIJLANI. Jaypee Brothers, New Delhi, 1995, 932pp, Rs. 233.00

There are so many textbooks of physiology that, for any new one that appears, two questions have to be asked: is it different, and is it better? Professor Bijlani's book deserves a strong affirmative to both questions.

It is different because it seeks to educate the medical student in physiology, leading him or her from a state of diffidence and uncertainty, through pathways of insight and interpretation, to a knowledge of the details of physiological science to be applied to a medical career. So many other textbooks are instruction manuals, assuming, usually unrealistically, that students already have an understanding of the principles and concepts of physiology on which to construct a soundly-based knowledge of medical physiology. Dr. Bijlani implies that an initial lack of perceptive background may be especially common in India but, alas, it is also very frequent in the western world. Far too many medical students learn in order to pass exams and to qualify; this book will educate them and make them better doctors as a result.

The book is also unusual because Dr. Bijlani in his preface urges students to underline parts of the text, to make marginal notes, and even to say where they think the text may be wrong. How many authors encourage desecration of their work!? But it is an important point. I learnt years ago that students who came to me with a text full of underlinings, crossings out and question marks were the ones who really read and tried to understand what they had read. A blank unmarked text can imply a blank and unremarkable mind.

One of the fascinations of this book are the insets, blocked out sections of historical, anecdotal and clinical material which, while they may not help the student to pass exams, are lightening flashes of illumination. Please, Dr Bijlani, in the next edition can we have more of these?

These differences compared with other textbooks of physiology are commendable, and make the book better than most texts with which I am familiar. The questions and answers at the end of each chapter demand understanding and not merely factual knowledge. All the illustrations have

been drawn by the authors themselves, and have both a uniformity and a refreshing and unconventional appearance that make them easy on the eye. The book is easy reading, because of its conversational and didactic style, and the length, almost 1000 pages of double columns, is never oppressive. Dr. Bijlani has written two thirds of the book himself, and has chosen for the other sections authors who agree with his philosophy and approach.

In his preface Dr. Bijlani tells a story about J.B.S. Haldane, a great scientist and a great lover of India. Many years ago I wrote to Haldane in India, asking for a reference for an Indian doctor applying for a job with me. Haldane sent me a five page hand-written letter. The first sentence read: "He is a very able man, you should take him." The rest of the letter was about his philosophy of medical education and his admiration for the Indian attitude to learning and life.

My advice to a potential reader of the textbook is simple: "The book is excellent and you should get it". Like Haldane's letter the book has the right balance. If you absorb it you will gain far more than knowledge of physiology; you will discover what physiology is all about and how Indian physiologists can illuminate understanding of the subject for both students and teachers. The book is an education, and there cannot be higher praise.

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