Book Reviews


INTRODUCTION

By the time a book reaches its fourth edition, one may assume that it has an established place in the library of its target readership and that it is reasonably popular. Obviously, successive editions may be dictated by advances in knowledge. It is also to be hoped that successive editions represent improvements on previous editions.

The purpose of this study was to examine the fourth edition of "Occupational Health" to see whether there was evidence of improvement over preceding editions.

METHODS

Though we do not place too much store by this, the book is in a series entitled "Pocket Consultant". Therefore we first examined the print area (a surrogate of content) of the body of the book and its dimensions and weight and to see how this measured up to an improvement in "Pocketability".

We calculated a Pocketability Index as the reciprocal of the product of the smallest circumference and the weight, expressed as a percentage of the first edition.

Next, we examined the overall layout of the book in relation to the titles and order of the chapters and the changes relative to previous editions.

Finally, we examined the contents of individual chapters.

RESULTS

shows (left most column) that there has been a steady increase in the print area over the four editions of this book. The middle column in shows the Pocketability Index and the rightmost the total printed area divided by the Pocketability Index.

The main changes in the organisation of the fourth edition compared with the third edition are that the chapter in the third edition entitled “Evaluating Workplace Hazards” (which preceded the chapters on chemical, physical and biological hazards) is now renamed “Risk Assessments” and (logically) follows the account of the hazards. The chapters on hazards in the third edition have been renamed “chemicals, gases, dusts and particles”, “light, heat… etc.” and “Occupational Infections” in this new edition. The third major change is the deletion of the chapter on education and the addition of a chapter on psychosocial aspects of the workplace.

In the new edition, the introduction no longer has discrete sections on the traditional professions within occupational health, perhaps reflecting a more integrated approach and attempts to give an international perspective to occupational health services. The second chapter, on occupational health services, now has “An International Perspective” in its title. This could possibly be of some value to senior occupational health professionals in multinational companies who want some first indication of what to look for in occupational health services in different types of country. For others, it will be useful as an insight into the scope and range of occupational health services. In the chapter on occupational diseases, the section on prescribed diseases in the UK which was placed second in edition three, is now relegated to position five, consistent with what is clearly an attempt to internationalise the book. The chapter contains a new and useful section on the toll of occupational diseases. This provides readily accessible data on the incidence and prevalence of certain diseases for the UK.

The chapter on chemicals, gases, dusts and particles is, for me, one of the least satisfactory chapters. It deals briefly with the occurrence, properties, uses, metabolism, health effects and various assessment techniques of sixteen inorganic chemicals, thirty-two organic chemicals, twenty-one toxic gases (including simple asphyxiants) and nine specific particulates. In a book of this size, this information is necessarily a condensation of information derived from larger standard texts.

Whilst these are fairly common chemicals, an individual occupational health practitioner is unlikely to encounter more than two or three of them in his every day practice. Moreover, the chapter does not give much insight into such issues as exposure to
mixtures, individual susceptibility, the way to make assessments based on toxicological data which is available and indices such as ADIs etc. We hope, in a future addition, that the authors may take the section on the general principles on toxicology out of chapter three and place it in this chapter along with some help in how to use the information which is readily available on chemicals from textbooks, safety data sheets, data-bases of various kinds in order to do hazard assessments.

The chapter on light, heat, noise, vibration, pressure and radiation slightly spoils the international image, which the book is developing, by beginning “Regulation 8 of the Workplace (Health Safety and Welfare Regulations, 1992...”). Otherwise, this chapter is very useful with lots of “How to...” information. In this respect, it is clearly to be distinguished from the chapter on chemicals.

The chapter on occupational infections is possibly unnecessary. Better accounts of the clinical conditions would be found in any standard text book of medicine (though it is accepted that these would not fit in the pocket!). It might be better to replace this chapter with a chapter which dealt with infection prevention and control in hospital workers, the prevention of Legionella infections in industrial water systems, etc.

The chapter on risk assessment is superb. The book is worth its price for this chapter alone.

It is a shame that the sections dealing with control refer only to the control of airborne contaminants and personal protection of the wearer. It would be helpful, for example, to give advice on noise abatement at source, protection from radiant heat, etc. Compared with the third edition, the chapter on special issues has lost its section on mental health at work (which now has its own chapter) and the chapter on rehabilitation and resettlement.

A section on working hours replaces the section on accidents. In view of the European Directive, working hours is obviously an important special issue. The section on accidents which has been omitted, was very small and we do not regret its passing. The former section on audit is now expanded to “audit and quality improvement in occupational health”. We would have thought that a special issue in 1998 was the integration of occupational health and safety management systems with environmental management systems and manufacturing management systems. Information on the value of such integration and how to go about achieving it would have been a useful addition.

We were encouraged by the discovery of the chapter on psycho-social aspects of the workplace, but disappointed in its content. It consists mainly of a series of headings and bullet points such as one might receive as a lecture handout in a short course on stress and stress management. As such, it might be useful for an occupational health professional who was constructing such a course. However, it does not touch on the difficult issues of changing the culture and management style of companies such that they foster the mental health and well-being of employees. It has a very brief section on counselling services, but does not give any help to an occupational health professional who has to advise the management on the introduction of an Employee Assistance Programme or on the selection of a contractor to provide the service.

The chapter on sources of information is useful, though necessarily incomplete. It would have been useful in relation to the Internet to point to the new Royal Society of Medicine publication entitled “Health Information on the Internet.”

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This book represents a very useful *vade mecum* to any occupational health professional. However, it will be found on the shelves not in the pocket!

The changes in the layout of the book are a logical improvement. However, the overall content of the book represents what could be done by the very busy authors and their close colleagues who were available to contribute. This edition deserves to succeed, but it also deserves to be followed by a fifth edition which is a concise but more comprehensive book which deals more with principles and practical methods than with information (such as that on chemicals) which is readily available from other sources and likely to meet only a fraction of the practitioner’s needs.

If we had not been given a copy to review, we’d have bought it.

John R. Jackson
Kathryn E. Zabierek
Jackson Hocking Limited
High View Barn
High House Lane
Tardebigge
Bromsgrove
Worcester B60 3AQ
UK