Book reviews

Magic Bullets, Lost Horizons. The Rise and Fall of Antibiotics
S. G. B. Amyes.

This book outlines the history of the fight against infection, describes the various antibacterial agents now in use, explains the means by which bacteria react to the antimicrobial threat and surveys the present state of resistance worldwide. It is a story well worth telling, and there can be few people in a better position to tell it than Sebastian Amyes.

The first two chapters deal with the basic history, which follows the popular mythologizing of the main protagonists and the events surrounding their discoveries. This section offers few new insights and would certainly not satisfy any serious historian. Moreover, it is littered with typographical errors, misspellings (including one of my all-time favourites: ‘an ex-patriot Scot’—surely a very rare species!) and quite a few factual lapses. There are also several mistakes caused, I suspect, by careless phraseology rather than lack of knowledge. Thus it is implied that Ehrlich's Salvarsan (irritatingly misspelt throughout) was a dye derivative and there is the astonishing statement, which would startle midwives, that Semmelweis died from puerperal fever! (In fact, as Irvine Loudon has pointed out in his book The Tragedy of Childbed Fever, death was probably not even due to Streptococcus pyogenes, as is popularly believed, but to a staphylococcal septicaemia.)

In the subsequent chapters, the author moves on to firmer ground: the errors of fact and, curiously, those of typography become fewer, though they are by no means absent. The various groups of antibacterial drugs are described in outline and there is a wide-ranging and authoritative account of transferable resistance mechanisms. This section is, however, far too detailed for the general reader-aimed to put some of the media sensationalism into perspective', but without some counterbalancing considerations, a whole dimension is lost from the perspective. Nowhere is the incontrovertible fact stated that most infection today is still treatable with well-established agents and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future: read any textbook of microbiology or infectious diseases and draw up lists of those infections that are, in the vast majority of cases, reliably treatable with standard antimicrobial drugs and those that are not. In concentrating on the dark side of antimicrobial drug resistance it is easy to forget, for example, that Streptococcus pyogenes—once among the most feared of the classic bacterial pathogens—remains fully susceptible to penicillin. Nobody is suggesting that we should be complacent about the threat of antimicrobial drug resistance, but let us also accentuate the positive. Those who maintain that we are on the verge of a ‘post-antimicrobial era’ simply do not understand the feelings of impotence that existed among doctors faced with untreatable infection before the advent of sulphonamides and penicillin.

It is clear from the title that this book is intended as a contribution to the burgeoning corpus of popular scientific literature that offers an essentially pessimistic view of human achievement. Certainly, the complete lack of any source references for the many controversial statements made within the text and the quite inadequate index (which seems obsessed with place names) make it unsuitable as a scientific treatise. There is much useful food for thought in this slim volume, but public understanding would be better served by a more balanced account of what antimicrobial agents can and cannot deliver.

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