Differential Diagnosis in Neuro-oncology
J. Hildebrand, M. Brada (eds). Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, 310 pp, £100.00, £59.50, US$95.00

Over the past decade a considerable number of textbooks on neuro-oncology have been published, on both primary brain tumors and neurological complications of systemic cancers. All these books are in principle tumor based, describing pathology, clinical findings and treatment of distinct tumors and their complications. This is the first neuro-oncology text book that is problem oriented, and as such is most timely. Each chapter discusses the differential diagnosis of relevant conditions, such as cognitive and behavioral disorders, epileptic seizures, cranial nerve and brain stem lesions, diffuse and focal lesions of the peripheral nerve system, visual alterations, and spinal cord lesions. Each chapter has subdivisions in which the clinical presentation, main etiologies, necessary investigations and therapy for each of these conditions is discussed sequentially. A strong point is that the main causes of each of these syndromes are divided into neoplastic, treatment related, infectious, paraneoplastic and metabolic. This ensures that probable causes are discussed systematically. By reading a specific chapter the reader can decide what causes are more or less likely in a patient with any of these syndromes.

Several topics are missing from this volume. I would have appreciated a chapter on the approach to a patient with brain metastases of an unknown primary brain tumor. Whereas, I consider the last chapter, on the treatment of the main neurological malignant diseases, outside the scope of this book. A hurdle to overcome in the problem-oriented approach is the fact that for most systemic cancer patients the systemic cancer is known at the time neurological complications arise, which is obviously not the case in primary brain tumors. This warrants a different approach for these subsets of patients. For example, visual problems in a patient with a known solid tumor is an entirely different problem to a patient without a known malignancy presenting with a hypophysal mass. In this respect, chapters discussing differential diagnosis of brain tumors at specific anatomical sites presenting with typical neuro-imaging features in patients without known malignancies would be informative. Some exceedingly rare conditions are mentioned, whereas for example the posterior leukoencephalopathy syndrome and ifosfamide encephalopathy are hardly touched on.

Despite these minor shortcomings, this book is recommended for the library of any oncology and neurology department. The book may help both the student and the more experienced physician in the problem solving of individual cases. The list of references at the end of each chapter gives adequate guidance for further study on specific subjects.

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