NEUROMUSCULAR DISEASE, EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS IN CLINICAL NEUROLOGY. 2006. By Michael Benatar. Published by Humana Press. 483 pages. Price C$170.

Writing a textbook can sometimes be a way of eschewing evidence-based medicine, and instead providing a platform for anecdotal, 'expert' and personal viewpoints. Not so with 'Neuromuscular Disease', where the editor does an admirable job of summarizing the current state of the evidence-based science (or art – depending on the topic!) behind the management of patients with neuromuscular diseases.

The book begins with several introductory chapters, totaling 40 pages, on the basics of trial design and statistical analysis for issues relating to diagnosis, treatment and prognosis, a theme which is followed in the clinically relevant chapters. As the editor states, the main point of this information is to allow readers to interpret the results of studies, without relying solely on the conclusions of the authors, something that requires an understanding of basic statistics and epidemiology. Useful for those (like me) who were never introduced to the finer points of evidence-based medicine, they are likely too brief and overly simplified for those amongst you who lust for a detailed and well-written methods section, but perhaps overly lengthy for others, given that there is no real link between these preliminary chapters and the clinical 'evidence' to follow. In the end I found the first few chapters too brief to allow me to fully understand some of the issues presented in the following chapters.

However, any minor shortcomings of the first few chapters are more than made up for in the next 400 plus pages. The meat of the book is a series of some 20 chapters, organized by common disease groups (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Guillain-Barré syndrome, myasthenia gravis, inflammatory myopathy etc). In each, an introductory section very briefly reviews the disease at hand and then lists pertinent clinical questions about diagnosis, treatment and prognosis to be answered in the ensuing sections. This is not a review of the clinical features of a given disease, or of all existing diagnostic or therapeutic options. Instead, following Socratic methods, a series of questions are posed about issues of diagnosis, treatment or prognosis, followed by a review of the evidence available to answer them. Sample questions include the following: Do epidural steroid injections really help lumbar radiculopathies? What is the evidence supporting the role of various diagnostic tests for peripheral neuropathy? What is the spectrum of neuropathy associated with a MGUS and what treatments have been proven effective for the various paraprotein-related neuropathies? Does treatment with steroids reduce the likelihood of progression from ocular to generalized MG?

As someone who has worked in the field of neuromuscular diseases for over a decade, I found that every chapter raised issues which were interesting, topical and relevant to common clinical practice issues. A shortfall, through no fault of the author, is that all too frequently only limited and poor quality studies were available, so that there was no hard evidence to answer the questions. This was predicted in an introductory chapter, which listed the barriers to knowledge – including a lack of high quality evidence. For each clinical question, the evidence is reviewed, and strengths and weaknesses of the individual studies briefly discussed. The utility of each chapter is also strengthened by a page long (or less) bulleted list summarizing the major conclusions in each disease area.

This book will appeal to all clinical neurologists and physiatrists who manage patients with neuromuscular disorders, ranging from the common (carpal tunnel syndrome) to the somewhat esoteric (Lambert Eaton Myasthenic Syndrome). The diseases chosen for review, and issues within each, are those faced on a daily basis in the clinic. It will serve as a useful check of how up to date one's knowledge base is on the management of patients with these disorders. It will also be a very valuable resource for those in academia (residents and fellows pay attention!) looking for areas where evidence is lacking and where higher quality studies and trials are needed.

The book begins with a discussion of Socrates and the wisdom involved in recognizing the limitations in accepted knowledge, which should necessarily lead to a quest to learn more. The material presented will allow readers to check their own assumptions about best practice against the evidence for or against specific management decisions. It also highlights the areas in which more high quality knowledge is needed to allow greater confidence in existing practices, or to prompt the design of studies and trials to assess future ones.

A tremendous amount of information summarizing the current evidence about the management of a wide variety of questions is found in this single textbook. I strongly recommend this book, which should be readily at hand on the desk of all neurologists who deal with neuromuscular diseases.

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