

Book review

***Viral Hepatitis: Diagnosis, Therapy, and Prevention.* Edited by Steven Specter, Humana Press, 1999**

Viral hepatitis is a major global health problem. There are five known viruses that primarily infect the liver and cause hepatitis A, B, C, D, and E. hepatitis B, C, D virus (HBV, HCV, HDV) infections can lead to chronic liver disease with its attendant long-term sequelae including cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). While HAV and HEV are not associated with chronic hepatitis, they are responsible for significant morbidity and mortality, especially in endemic areas. In addition to the personal costs of infected individuals, the financial burden of viral hepatitis is immense. Thus, it is not surprising that viral hepatitis have become the focus of intense research and public awareness.

In *Viral Hepatitis: Diagnosis, Therapy and Prevention*, a cadre of international investigators thoroughly review all aspects of these important human pathogens, including available therapeutic and prevention strategies. The book begins with a concise introduction highlighting important historical achievements in this field, which has seen dramatically evolved during the past 30 years, in large part due to rapid developments in molecular techniques. After setting the historical tone, each of the well-known hepatotropic viruses (HAV, HBV, HCV, HDV, and HEV) are sequentially examined in the following five chapters. A chapter is also devoted to the newly discovered GB-viruses, of which GBV-C has been shown to infect humans. Although GBV-C is phylogenetically similar to HCV, initial data linking GBV-C infec-

tion with hepatitis in humans has not been validated in numerous subsequent clinical and epidemiological studies. These well-organized chapters provide an in-depth account of the current knowledge of each of these viral agents including their basic virology, diagnosis, pathogenesis, epidemiology, natural history as well as the clinical features of the diseases they cause. The thorough and well-referenced discussions of the molecular biology of HBV and HDV are particularly noteworthy in this regard. The discussion regarding the immunologic mechanisms responsible for hepatocellular damage in chronic HCV infection is somewhat dated, which is an almost unavoidable occurrence when reviewing such a rapidly evolving topic.

After the comprehensive description of the respective infectious agents and their diseases, the book focuses on the treatment and prevention of viral hepatitis. Interferon therapy has played a critical role in the management of patients with chronic hepatitis. As such, these proteins with anti-viral, anti-proliferative, and immunomodulatory properties are carefully reviewed; the introductory discussion about their potential mechanisms of action is particularly good in this regard. An excellent section on the interferon-related adverse effects is also included in this chapter. The clinical response rates to the interferon therapy in patients with chronic HBV, HCV and HDV infections are then presented under separate headings. Importantly, experimental and alternative anti-viral therapies are also amply discussed in this section. Interestingly, milk thistle, which has become a popular herbal remedy for the treatment of liver diseases, is not mentioned. The

therapeutic section also succumbs to the rapid emergence of new information in the evolving area of anti-viral therapy. In particular, the results of recent large clinical trials demonstrating enhanced efficacy of adjunctive interferon–ribavirin therapy over interferon monotherapy in chronic hepatitis C were not available at the time of writing and are not included. The final chapters are devoted to the only vaccines currently available, namely those to prevent HAV and HBV infection. The historical account that underlies the development of the HAV vaccine and the thorough presentation of the various preparations available is particularly strong.

Overall, the book is well written and organized. The text is supplemented with well-conceived ta-

bles, figures and graphs that facilitate understanding of the information presented. *Viral Hepatitis: Diagnosis, Therapy and Prevention* is a book that crystallizes in one volume a remarkable amount of information. It should be enjoyed by primary care practitioners, as well as gastroenterologists, hepatologists, virologists, and anyone genuinely interested in these important infections.

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