Eur J Cancer, Vol. 28A, No. 10, p. 1763, 1992.
Printed in Great Britain
0964-1947/92 $5.00 + 0.00

Book Reviews

Epidemiology and Biology of Multiple Myeloma

Edited by G.I. Obrams and M. Potter.
Berlin, Springer, 1991. 192 pp. ISBN 3-540-54061-X. DM60.00.

MYELOMATOSIS (MM) is a lymphoproliferative disorder for which there are very few aetiological clues. Because there has been a substantial increase in the number of reported cases of MM in the past 30 years, particularly among the American black population, the National Cancer Institute of America (NCI) held a workshop in March 1990 to discuss epidemiological factors that may influence the development of MM. Furthermore, because the malignant plasma cell that characterises MM is unlikely to be the 'stem cell' of the disease, discussion also focussed on putative precursor cells and the possibility that there may be a premalignant condition. The texts that provided the basis for these discussions are contained in this volume. Topics include occupational and immunological factors, the possibility that MM may progress from a premalignant condition, such as monoclonal gammopathy of unknown significance, hypotheses regarding aetiology and pathogenesis from malignant precursors in the B-cell lineage and the role of growth factors, particularly interleukin 6.

Since the function of a workshop is to provide a forum for discussion of ongoing and future studies, written texts provide only an introduction for these discussions and are usually short and succinct. The contents of this volume are no exception, particularly as the text is printed in camera-ready format and authors appear to have been confined to brevity. Whilst the discussions at the workshop may well have been informative, stimulating and in-depth, this is not reflected in the texts. For example, in the section on epidemiology, the conclusions remain that there is no primary clue to prevention of MM, that black people may have to be considered separately and that further studies with larger sample numbers are required, whether it be to study the effect of chemicals or the contribution of allergy. Even review presentations such as MacLennon and Chan's "Origin of the bone marrow plasma cell", has not been afforded adequate page length to permit the authors to display their undoubted knowledge of the subject. This is not the fault of the contributors; however, the reader is left with the notion that very little is known about MM and that investigators should return to their laboratories and clinics. Whilst such conclusions may be expected from the participants at a workshop, they do not cater for the requirements of non-participants. The general reader is likely to find the texts limited because of the confines of the camera-ready format and would be advised to consult the numerous review articles published elsewhere, some of which are written by the contributors. Similarly, investigators into MM are likely to be familiar with the contents and would probably refer to original referred articles. The book, therefore, has limited appeal. Perhaps investigators who require financial support would find some of the many unanswered questions regarding MM of use in applications to funding organisations.

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Eur J Cancer, Vol. 28A, No. 10, pp. 1763-1764, 1992.
Printed in Great Britain
0964-1947/92 $5.00 + 0.00
Pergamon Press Ltd

Oral Contraceptives and Breast Cancer—Institute of Medicine, 1991

By M. Henderson, L. Dorflinger, *et al.*
Washington, National Academy Press, 1991. 200 pp. ISBN 0-309-04493-6. £21.50.

THIS BOOK gives the views of a committee set up by the USA Institute of Medicine to advise the federal government on policy options, directions for future research and the recommendations which should be given to practising physicians regarding oral contraceptive use as it relates to breast cancer.

Given that some 9% of women are likely to die of breast cancer and that the majority of younger women in Britain and the United States have used oral contraceptives, the subject of this book is of immense importance. The evidence is clear and consistent that oral contraceptives have had no substantial effect, either way, on breast cancer mortality for those who used the pill in the 1960s and 1970s, usually at a mature age. The controversial issue is whether oral contraceptives are safe for younger women before a first pregnancy. The increase in breast cancer risk observed in some studies among young pill users may foretell an epidemic of breast cancer as the women who grew up with the pill from adolescence reach middle age, but there are inconsistencies between the studies. None of them, of course, are randomized controlled trials but the design of the most recent case–control studies is sophisticated.

By the time the consequences of long-term use of the pill from an early age do become clear, the information will no longer be directly relevant to the choices faced by young women. The oral contraceptives on offer have changed and will continue to do so, rendering the epidemiological evidence always a little out of date. The big hope, therefore, lies in increasing biological understanding to the point where it becomes possible to predict the effects of different pill formulations and design oral contraceptives that would, in addition to their other desirable effects, protect against breast cancer.

The best part of this book lies in its appendices. Three excellent and complimentary reviews of the epidemiological evidence are included. The first, by Kathleen Malone, gives a very readable account of the evolution of this field of research, explaining the methodological problems and controversies that have arisen.

The second, by David Thomas, presents a review of the