The X in Sex: How the X Chromosome works.

**BOOK REVIEWS**

**The X in Sex: How the X Chromosome works.**


This highly readable book tells the story of the X chromosome from Aristotle’s musings on gender difference right through to a modern understanding of the genetics of the X chromosome. The author’s engaging style makes modern genetics accessible both to the complete layperson and to those of us whose preclinical genetics are a hazy memory. Bainbridge is a lecturer on comparative anatomy and physiology at the Royal Veterinary College in London and uses his broad knowledge of the animal world to set human sex determination in a fascinating wider context. Who would have thought that many species could do away with the Y chromosome altogether, or that the male kangaroo uses his redundant pouch as a scrotum? In a chapter entitled ‘The Duke of Kent’s Testicles’, Bainbridge describes the unfortunate spread of haemophilia through 19th century European Royal families to illustrate the inheritance of sex-linked disorders. From a disastrous random mutation in a sperm in one of the Duke’s testicles to the Russian Revolution, the history is irreverent but the genetic implications are taken seriously.

The final chapter covers intriguing aspects of human sex determination: what makes men into men and women into women, in both the genetic and the broader senses. This chapter explains why identical twins are more often female than male and why female twins are never quite so identical as male twins. There are also genetic theories to explain why women are more prone to autoimmune disease. Best of all is the revelation that little girls express a gene for good behaviour – and little boys don’t!

This slim book is a good read, amusing yet informative and authoritative.

Reviewed by Kate Weaver, MB ChB, MFFP
Staff Grade Doctor in Reproductive Health Care, Edinburgh, UK


This American book has a catchy title that completely describes what you are getting – and does it? It seems obvious to point out that the book is very pharmacological, but perhaps the subject cannot be fitted quite so completely into pharmacological categories. These ‘facts’ seem to have been over-interpreted when presented to ‘practising physicians’. The lists of references included a wide range of animal studies (mice, cats, rats, hamsters, stallions, male mosquito fish and striped bass). I was concerned as to how much of this could really be evidence of sexual function in the human species.

The book is divided into two halves. The first deals with the effects of drugs on the causation of sexual problems and the second addresses drug treatment for sexual problems. The introduction to the treatment of premature ejaculation says: ‘None of the mentioned agents has been approved by the FDA for the treatment of PE’. It seems unusual to devote a whole chapter on treatment to unlicensed drugs.

Although passing reference is made to the ‘psychosexual context’ it would be easy reading this book to feel that the answers to sexual problems lie only in pharmacology. The authors state that: ‘Men may have ... unrealistic expectations of their sexual performance’. There was no suggestion that this needs addressing.

The authors ask even more of us in the consultation. They state: ‘It is critical to obtain a baseline measure of sexual function prior to starting a new pharmacological treatment’. This seems an unachievable goal. We know that doctors are not yet very good at talking with their patients about sex. Furthermore, the time constraints within which we all work mean that this issue will not always have sufficient priority to merit a share of the consultation.

Having felt cause to argue in particular with the way things are said in this book, I do think it has some use in presenting pharmacological information about sexual function. Perhaps that is after all what it intended to do.

Reviewed by Alex Connon, MBChB, MPH
General Practitioner and Family Planning Doctor, Edinburgh, UK

**Website Reviews**

Understanding laboratory tests

The Association of Clinical Biochemists has launched this website to help patients understand about laboratory testing. I suspect (see the review about high vaginal swab testing and reporting) that many doctors might also find it helpful. The home page gives some news items, together with a search box and some drop-down menus. The menus are headed Tests, Conditions and Diseases and Screening, so that information about individual tests or conditions can be located. On the website are links to more general information such as how to interpret the terms used in tests (like reference ranges) and tours of what happens when patients go to the laboratory. There is also a feedback page and the site is peer-reviewed.
Advanced provision of emergency contraception does not reduce abortion rates

Judy Murty

J Fam Plann Reprod Health Care 2004 30: 279
doi: 10.1783/0000000042177333

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