WAO Book Review

The Allergy Epidemic: A Mystery of Modern Life
By Dr. Susan Prescott
Published by UWA Publishing (University of Western Australia); first published in 2011
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16 Chapters plus notes and an extensive bibliography
Foreword by Prof. Ruby Pawankar, President, World Allergy Organization

This wonderful instructive text is a unique contribution to the literature intended for the instruction of allergy sufferers. The dedication reads, "This book is for the countless millions who suffer the many burdens of allergic diseases, and for all those who are working so hard to solve the mystery of this epidemic."

It is unique because it is designed not only for the sufferers but for those of us who care for them. A difficult task, to speak, to such diverse audiences, but Dr. Prescott has carried it out with immense aplomb. She has delicately walked the line between an erudite text intended for scholars and a "how to manage your disease volume" designed for patients. In doing so, she deals with complex scientific phenomenon in an easily readable and concise fashion.

It is also unique in its topics. The book is actually divided into two fairly distinct sections. The first section is, for the most part, a discussion of the scientific principles underlying the "allergy epidemic." The second section deals with the more practical aspects of allergic diseases and includes subjects such as the general principles of diagnosis and management, food allergy, and the allergic diseases such as eczema, asthma, and allergic rhinitis. Although it is a daunting task indeed to capture this vast area in an intelligible manner, Dr. Prescott does it with clarity and impact.

The chapters at the beginning of the book on the immune system, the importance of early life in the development of allergy, genetics, and especially the section on epigenetics are alone worth the price of the text. I found it highly instructive, even as a physician who has been involved in the management of patients with allergic disease for over four decades.

Another wonderfully enchanting aspect of the text is that it is embedded with periodic personal anecdotes, tales of Dr. Prescott's family and mentors, and touches of her personal philosophy. All of these add warmth not normally seen in such books, and make the appeal of this text far more personable.

Even though difficult scientific concepts are dealt with, it is a relatively "easy read" enlivened by the fact that it not only projects cold facts, but does so with an underlying "story line" that keeps the reader interested throughout the entire manuscript.

In sum, I found this to be an absolutely delightful tale about allergy which should be part and parcel of every allergist's library and can be recommended for our patients. I finished it with a permanent change in perspective as to the underpinnings of the rapid growth in allergic disease that we have seen over the past 50 years. Dr. Prescott has opened my eyes to phenomenon of which I was totally unaware. I was grateful for the read and, as noted, can recommend it without hesitation.

WAO thanks author, Phillip L. Lieberman, MD, of Asthma & Allergy Associates, Germantown, Tennessee USA, and the Editor of WAO Reviews, for his review of this book.