AROMATASE INHIBITION AND BREAST CANCER

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Published by Marcel Dekker Inc. New York (2000)
RRP: US$150.00

This book is the product of a large number of contributors, including many of the leading lights in the pre-clinical and clinical investigation of endocrine therapy, predominantly for breast cancer. The historical and biochemical aspects of aromatase inhibition are covered well, and relevant clinical trial data are presented thoroughly up to the end of 1999.

The book begins with an excellent overview by Mitch Dowsett, well known for his endocrine research at The Royal Marsden Hospital in London. There follow sections on metastatic breast cancer, early breast cancer, prevention and future directions. The book concludes with a section on potential non-breast cancer indications for the use of aromatase inhibitors. Panel discussions appear at the end of each section.

A book like this inevitably suffers from a certain amount of repetition. Each contributor begins with a brief scene-setting introduction that, if done well, will sound much like everyone else's introduction. We are not expecting a novel however, and a bit of skimming solves this problem. All in all an important and relevant subject is dealt with comprehensively. I did not detect any inaccuracies nor any significant omissions, and the text is for the most part well written.

So why am I unhappy? There are two reasons, the first a generic complaint applicable to all publications like this. I mean no criticism of the contributors, but I cannot for the life of me think who would want to read this book. Those who know a lot about the subject will not learn anything, and those new to the area would be enlightened more quickly (and substantially more cheaply) by doing a quick Medline search and finding a review article.

Additionally, it is impossible for a medical book to be up-to-date at the time of publication. What clinicians need to know now is how well aromatase inhibitors compare with tamoxifen in the treatment of metastatic disease. The answer to this is not in the book but it is in the public domain, since these trials have now been published.

My second concern is a somewhat darker one. The cover of this publication, its title and the back page blurb all present what appears to be a book produced by two editors. The impression is that these two editors decided to produce a book because of the importance and relevance of the subject. However, on closer inspection, the book is clearly a summary of a meeting, with presenters asked to provide manuscripts. This is not mentioned overtly anywhere, nor is any information given as to how such a meeting might have been arranged and who might have sponsored it.

I can, however, have a very good guess. The cover illustration is a photograph very like the one used to advertise one of the aromatase inhibitors. The legend on the inside cover identifies the drug by brand name only. The same drug gets a whole chapter to itself – the only one to do so. The only three contributors not identified with an institution belong to the one company. And so on.

None of this is as obvious as it sounds, and it took me a while to ferret out these facts. This is disingenuous and probably lots of other “dis” words as well. The reader is entitled to know the environment in which the information was presented. He who pays the piper…

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