Until about 10 years ago, the majority of medical professionals still believed that ‘senile dementia’ was a logical consequence of aging and due primarily to ‘calcification of the brain’. Only a few specialists at that time had become aware of the pathological and clinical complexity of the illness. During the recent past, however, knowledge has increased experimentally at all levels of biological organization, leaving no doubt that senile dementia not only is a true disease but also that it has various, pathologically and clinically distinct forms of apparently different, albeit still mostly unknown etiologies. Consequently, the number of diagnoses has dramatically increased and terms like ‘Alzheimer’s disease’ and ‘senile dementia’ have become as popular as ‘cancer’, hypertension’ or ‘osteoporosis’.

However, how many of those interested in this field really know who Dr. Alois Alzheimer was or why his name was adopted for this particular degenerative condition of the brain cortex? Who really knows how the pathological, medical and psychiatric concepts of the dementing illness have evolved over the past 200 years? Who always wanted to know but never found more than rather fragmented pieces of information, for instance from introductions to review papers (often copied from one another) or from an occasional learned dinner speech (usually hard to obtain in writing)?

Here is good news for all those interested in more than just the latest news from the research front! With Alzheimer and the Dementias, G.E. Berrios and H.L. Freeman, with the help of the authors P. Hoff, T.R. Denning, C. Cahn and J.G. Howells, have succeeded in editing a timely and extremely useful book primarily on the historical but also on the factual aspects of the topic. The first chapter is modestly called Introduction but actually contains a careful outline of the current and past definitions and views of the Alzheimer’s disease theme complex; the titles of the following seven chapters speak for themselves: Dementia before the Twentieth Century (G.E. Berrios, H.L. Freeman), Alzheimer and His Time (P. Hoff), Social Aspects of Alzheimer’s Disease (H.L. Freeman), The Vascular Dementias (T.R. Denning, G.E. Berrios), The History of Subcortical Dementia (C. Cahn), Other Forms of Dementia (G.E. Berrios) and the elegant essay Dementia in Shakespeare’s King Lear (J.G. Howells).

The very readable, yet concisely written book is complemented with a timetable of Notable Events in Alzheimer’s Lifetime and twelve historical photographs related to the life and work of Dr. Alzheimer.

The book can be highly recommended to all experts as well as generalists interested in the field. In addition, for the more practically oriented specialists, primarily looking for historical details to
‘spice up’ their papers or lectures on Alzheimer’s disease or related topics it provides a rich source of information!

Marco Ermini
Caleb E. Finch, Thomas E. Johnson (eds)
Molecular Biology of Aging

This UCLA colloquium is unusual in that it covers a far wider field than what its title normally implicates. Finch and Johnson have assembled a collection of authors, quite a number of whom are not regularly found in gerontological literature, rendering it a most stimulating volume that should be read by all those involved in aging research. The six major sections cover Genetic Control of Lifespan, DNA Damage and Repair, Oxidative Damage and Glycation, DNA Replication and Clonal Senescence, Cell Death and finally Gene Expression. A number of topics not yet well established in aging research are discussed, such as DNA methylation, nonenzymatic tissue glycosylation, prior disease, heat shock response – these are just a few examples picked at random that caught the reviewer’s attention. If there is one reservation, it is that the ‘camera-ready’ printing of typed manuscripts with so many different typewriters, in the reviewer’s opinion, renders it a most unattractive book.

H.P. von Hahn, Basel
Khalid Iqbal, Donald R. C. McLachlan, Bengt Winblad, Henry M. Wisniewski (eds)
Alzheimer’s Disease: Basic Mechanisms, Diagnosis and Therapeutic Strategies

Research in Alzheimer’s disease has tremendously increased in the past few years. The literature on basic mechanisms is expanding dramatically in all fields related to this degenerative brain disease. Many conferences and symposia were and are held trying to bring data results and new hypotheses together. The book resulting from selected presentations of the recently held Second International Conference on Alzheimer’s Disease and Related Disorders (Toronto, Canada, July 1990) contains updated information covering almost all disease-related topics. The book follows the trend to publish after such conferences highly sophisticated, illustrated abstract compendiums. Such a way of publication can help researchers as well as clinicians to get an overview on new trends about a complicated and widespread field. As mentioned by the editors in their preface, the book is useful as a reference book for the different topics in Alzheimer’s research. The reader is guided towards the front of today’s knowledge of the clinical course as well as the latest possibilities of diagnostic tools, including brain imaging techniques and possible biological markers related to the disease. Structural and biochemical aspects of the neuropathology is covered in another chapter. New aspects concerning basic mechanisms of neuronal degeneration including cytoskeletal pathology, involvement in signal transduction and aberrant protein phosphorylation are presented. In two other chapters, the knowledge about epidemiology, risk factors and environmental factors is presented. The genetic aspect of Alzheimer’s disease is discussed in a separate chapter. A certain progress in the development of possible animal models for this disease is described: the greatest expectation is put in the model of transgenic animals (model of transgenic mice, trisomy 16 mice). The book ends with a presentation of current therapies related to the cholinergic hypothesis (cholinesterase inhibitors), but unfortunately no causal therapy is presently available.
In conclusion, as stated above, the book is of great value as a reference tool to update the current knowledge in Alzheimer’s research. The contributions are drawn from some of the most productive scientists in the field of Alzheimer’s research. One small final remark to the editors and publishers: would it be possible perhaps to publish such a comprehensive overview in a little less expensive way, so that many more people could have access to this information (paperback)?

Albert Enz, Basel
Victor A. McKusick, Clair A. Francomano
Mendelian Inheritance in Man

For those not familiar with this essential book it is a catalogue of hereditary diseases classified alphabetically according to whether they are thought to be dominant, recessive or X-linked; an asterisk against the condition indicates that the inheritance has been proved. Against each condition, there is a text varying in length from a few lines to 3-4 columns or more followed by a list of significant references.

From the angle of gerontologists and geriatricians it is particularly relevant in certain aspects – it gives fascinating details of rare diseases of accelerating ageing, such as progeria and Cockayne’s syndrome: it includes interesting pieces on common conditions with a multi-factorial aetiology, where a hereditary element is suggested, such as essential hypertension, diabetes mellitus, involutional osteoporosis and Alzheimer’s disease, and lastly it itemises rare hereditary conditions often manifesting themselves in old age, such as hereditary coproporphyria.

This 9th edition is welcome and, although it is trite to say that a book is essential for every district general hospital library, in this particular case it is true. This volume is often not available, perhaps because it crosses speciality boundaries, and no particular discipline requests its purchase.

James Andrews, Shepperton