Practical Surgical Pathology: Morphology & Molecular Pathology

Not to know is bad, not to wish to know is worse.
—African proverb

Practical Surgical Pathology: Morphology & Molecular Pathology is an ambitious undertaking. The ambition is apparent in its vast scope—which ranges from explaining Köhler illumination to assessing HER2. As stated in its preface, the book is intended for those who “practice or study pathology,” and its objectives are to cover most “difficult situations,” highlight “recent developments,” “integrate” molecular and morphologic practice, and be “readable.” Furthermore, its stated aim is to provide a “clear and succinct text, top quality, annotated images, and current but practical molecular information together, so they can work synergistically.” The book largely succeeds in attaining these lofty goals.

Here, information that is usually buried in voluminous larger textbooks is rather easy to discover (eg, parathyroid hormone has an astonishingly short half-life of 4 minutes, and CD15 staining is predominantly membranous, although there is some staining of the Golgi zone). Wherever applicable, pragmatic molecular methods are amply described, as in confirming the diagnosis of papillary thyroid carcinoma or in confirming identification of a specimen. Some lesser known clinicopathologic matters are explained: for example, why exactly is splenectomy “harmless” in adults but should be undertaken with caution in a child? The occasionally enigmatic relationship between morphologic and molecular pathology is handled well. For example, it is stated that renal cell carcinomas associated with translocations of the microphthalmia transcription factors “are another example of a specific translocation overriding the histologic appearance in the establishment of a specific diagnosis.” The differential diagnoses of key diseases are rather elegantly explained (eg, atelectasis vs usual interstitial pneumonitis, radiation atypia vs residual glial tumor). Here and there are subtle touches of humor: it is pointed out that, contrary to their literal meanings, the terms pit and crypt refer to the superficial part of the gastric epithelium, and foveola, which refers to the same region, means a small fovea (Latin for pit!). In a reasonable space-saving development, which will undoubtedly be replicated by others, the book cites only key references and then only with PMID (PubMed Identification) numbers. The latter can readily provide online access at the time of reading to the “intrepid.” There is even a short section on quality assurance, where it is stated that optimal patient care involves “good performance, good communication and thorough documentation.” Enough said!

In an era when subspecialty books typically exceed a thousand pages, and multispecialty textbooks usually encompass multiple volumes, this relatively lean single-volume text cannot be regarded as all encompassing (nor does it make that claim). Be that as it may, Practical Surgical Pathology: Morphology & Molecular Pathology imparts enough knowledge and wisdom to serve as a worthy secondary reference—for those who wish to know.

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