

Book Reviews

***The Paradoxical Brain.* Edited by Narinder Kapur. New York: Cambridge University Press; 2011. 466 pp. US \$80 Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0521115575.**

At its core, the driving force behind all of science is an innate curiosity about observations that cannot be explained. And yet, academic science texts often focus on consensus views and fail to point out places where the established models fail. In *The Paradoxical Brain*, editor Narinder Kapur tackles counterintuitive phenomena in neuroscience head on, from savantism in autism spectrum conditions to how malignant brain tumors can suppress allergies. While the format of the text follows the traditional academic style, with contributing authors from various fields taking turns describing recent advances in neuroscience, the articles are much more engaging than in most academic texts. By making unexplained paradoxes his unifying theme, Kapur has encouraged the authors to be equally informative and provocative, and the end result is an excellent book that would be equally appropriate as a leisure read or a reference text. The authors are genuinely interested in (and to some extent confused by) the topics that they discuss, and it shows. The tone of each section is refreshingly informal, with the authors spending most of their time discussing interesting yet perplexing phenomena and then speculating on possible underlying causes. Twenty-four different phenomena are discussed, including functional sensory facilitation after the loss of eyesight, the (largely ignored) positive effects of aging on cognition, and the subjective nature of memory.

In the end, *The Paradoxical Brain* manages to successfully be both a rigorous

academic text and an entertaining read. While some of the articles are accessible to anyone with an interest in neuroscience or the cognitive sciences, the book as a whole is more appropriate for those with an advanced background in the field; many of the articles assume that the reader has an understanding of fundamental principles of neuroscience and a basic knowledge of neuroanatomy.

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***Remedy and Reaction: The Peculiar American Struggle over Health Care Reform.* By Paul Starr. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; 2011. 324 pages. US \$28.50 Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0300171099.**

In *Remedy and Reaction*, Professor Paul Starr puts the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) and earlier efforts to achieve universal health coverage into historical and political context. Starr points out that “in any given year, the most costly 5 percent of people account for more than 50 percent of health-care costs, and the top 10 percent of people account for 70 percent of costs (p152).” These numbers make it clear that a mandate of some sort (forcing either the individual or the employer to pay for health insurance) is necessary to ensure the viability of any plan that attempts to provide universal health coverage. Without such a mandate, healthy people are not likely to pay for health care. As healthy individuals eschew coverage, the same coverage gets more and more expensive to cover an increasingly sick and needy subscriber population, a phenomenon known

as “adverse selection.” One way to prevent adverse selection is to promote the formation of groups, or alliances, for purchasing insurance that will spread the associated risk and make premiums more affordable.

Adverse selection has garnered extensive political attention. It served as the driver behind the Clinton proposal to create “regional health alliances,” and it prompted the individual mandate in the 2007 Massachusetts health care plan shepherded into law by then Gov. Mitt Romney (who as a Republican presidential candidate now disavows the mandate). Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America” in 1994 helped shift the focus of health care reform from universal coverage to cost containment in an effort to create a balanced budget. Throughout the book, Dr. Starr explores numerous political approaches to adverse selection and examines the respective effectiveness and validity of the various approaches.

Material in the book is organized chronologically, beginning with the first mention of “social insurance” and “protection against the costs of sickness” in the 1912 presidential election by the Progressive Party. The text touches on relevant historical predecessors of the PPACA such as a failed 1943 bill that proposed comprehensive health insurance and the emergence of employer-based health insurance after World War II. In 1974, Richard Nixon proposed comprehensive health insurance that relied on an employer mandate, but the Watergate scandal ended the effort. Dr. Starr, who was an advisor to Hillary Clinton’s Health Policy Task Force, then proceeds to devote almost a quarter of the book to the Clinton administration and its impact on health care policy. The author is sympathetic to the Clintons but critical of the way they introduced their policy and of the media, and the book is valuable for its insider’s analysis of the political factors that led to the failure of the Clinton health plan. The book ultimately concludes with chapters on the Massachusetts plan, the presidential election of 2008, and the success of the Obama administration in effecting passage of PPACA in 2010. Although occasionally dense, *Remedy and Re-*

action is generally quite readable for the non-expert. It would be of greatest interest, though, to historians and health care policy analysts. If, however, the U.S. Supreme Court finds the individual mandate to be unconstitutional, then politicians and lobbyists on both sides of the debate will be scouring the book for insights and strategies for the next battle over comprehensive health coverage.

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Fundamentals of Medical Physiology. Edited by Joel Michael. New York: Thieme Medical Publishers, Inc.; 2011. 633 pp. US \$79.99 Paperback. ISBN 978-1604062748.

Fundamentals of Medical Physiology is a concise textbook of medical physiology written for first- and second-year medical students or anyone interested in learning the core principles of physiology through an introduction to clinical cases in the context of each organ system. The book is divided into 10 sections, each prefaced with a general outline of topics covered, a brief overview of an organ system, and presentation of a relevant clinical case followed by open-ended questions to think about while reading the section. While the organization of chapter topics is conventional, the book’s focus on highlighting recurring themes underlying physiological mechanisms (e.g., homeostasis, energy, balance of forces, reservoir, flow, elasticity, and cell-cell communication) is novel and provides the reader with additional, alternative ways in which to assimilate and integrate information. Schematic diagrams, illustrations, tables, and figures are amply provided and are useful in understanding and reviewing key information. Unfortunately, the first section, “Foundations of Physiology,” which covers basic cell biology and the concept of control systems contributing to homeostasis, is not as detailed as the other sections and thus is best taken as a brief 24-page refresher. As a side note, minor errata are also present in the text, most of which are identifiable in con-