Adolescents and Sexual Ambiguity

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The complicated (for me, at least) topics of abnormalities of puberty (delayed or precocious), growth and short stature, and disorders of sexual development, also known as ambiguous genitalia, are reviewed in this issue of Pediatric Annals. The topic of ambiguous genitalia is particularly complex, with optimal outcomes dependent upon expertise from the fields of endocrinology, ethics, gynecology, psychology, and urology.

In fact, one of this month’s papers by Ganka Douglas, PhD, and colleagues (see page 149) details the Multidisciplinary Gender Medicine Team that has been organized at the Texas Children’s Hospital in Houston.

This topic was the centerpiece of the 2002 Pulitzer Prize-winning and best-selling novel Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides. In this work, the protagonist, Calpurnia Stephanides, discovers at age 14 that she is really a he, related to a mutation in the gene encoding 5-alpha-reductase type 2 that results in autosomal recessive intersex.

This enzyme normally converts testosterone to the more potent androgen dihydrotestosterone. Affected individuals are genetic males with testes (often with cryptorchidism), but they usually have female primary sex characteristics and are commonly initially raised as girls. They have a blind vaginal pouch without uterus or fallopian tubes, lack ovaries, are infertile, and are at increased risk for testicular cancer. Eugenides chronicles the effect of this genetic mutation on three generations of a Greek family in which cousins have married cousins for many generations.

NEW BOARD MEMBERS

I’d like to welcome two new members to our Editorial Board. Andrew A. Bremer, MD, PhD, is an endocrinologist, clinician, and investigator specializing in metabolism and nutrition. Dr. Bremer, also an Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at Vanderbilt University, has a firm grasp on pediatric endocrine issues, and spe-
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Robert J. Hilt, MD, FAAP, is an Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Washington in Seattle. Dr. Hilt began his career as a general pediatrician, but decided to specialize in pediatric mental health care after noting the growing demand for it in his own patient population. Dr. Hilt also was our guest editor for our October and November 2011 issues.

Drs. Bremer and Hilt have both served as guest editors of Pediatric Annals over the past year, handily demonstrating their ability to explicate complicated subject matters in an easy-to-read, thorough manner. As the complexity of diagnostic demands on the general practitioner increases, offering our readers the specialized expertise of Drs. Bremer and Hilt, and of all our knowledgeable Board members, is paramount. I’m pleased to have such a great group of colleagues to help meet your practice needs.

THIS MONTH’S STAMPS

Stamps chosen to illustrate this column include two that honor specific hospitals and one that honors a famous microbiologist.

In honor of the 140th anniversary of the Kiang Wu Hospital Charitable Association, the colorful, large souvenir sheet was issued in 2011 by Macao, a former Portuguese colony near Hong Kong and now a special administrative region of the Republic of China. This organization supports the Kiang Wu Hospital, Nursing College, and other subsidiaries.

In 1892, Dr. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), who had graduated in 1886 from the Hong Kong College of Medicine, came to Kiang Wu Hospital to initiate Western-style medicine. Sun Yat-sen went on to become the first president of the provisional Republic of China (the forerunner of today’s Republic of China on the mainland).

The Mexican stamp depicting the heart and blood vessels celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Hospital of Cardiology of the National Medical Center of Mexico. This hospital was initially founded as a hospital for pulmonary diseases and thoracic surgery, but then became a cardiac center.

Rudolf Weigl (1883-1957) is shown on the 2011 stamp from Poland. Weigl was a well-known microbiologist who, in the 1930s, developed the first effective vaccine against epidemic typhus (caused by Rickettsia prowazekii and transmitted by the body louse). He also founded the Weigl Institute in Lwow, Poland (now Lviv, Ukraine).

During the Nazi occupation of Poland, the Institute employed 1,000 people, including Polish intellectuals, Jews, and members of the underground, to produce the vaccine until the facility was shut down by the Russians in 1944. In 2003, Weigl was recognized by Israel as one of the Righteous Among the Nations of the World.

[LEFT] A Mexican stamp celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Hospital of Cardiology of the National Medical Center of Mexico. [RIGHT] A Polish stamp honoring Rudolf Weigl (1883-1957), the microbiologist who developed the first effective vaccine against epidemic typhus.