

## ***BOOK REVIEW***

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### **Going Higher: Oxygen, Man and Mountains**

**Charles Houston, The Mountaineers, Seattle, 1998. US\$16.95**

**I**t was a great pleasure at Christmas to receive a copy of the new edition of Charles Houston's book on high altitude medicine and physiology. 'Going Higher: Oxygen, Man and Mountains' began life in 1980 as 'Going Higher: the story of man and high altitude'. This fourth edition is largely re-written and a useful new addition to add to the increasing array of books on the subject.

Houston's enthusiasm for mountains and the physiology of hypoxia shines through in his new edition. The advertising blurb that appears on the flyer about the book notes that Houston has been doing mountain medicine for "more than 50 years".....and he seems to be still doing it.

The book is divided into four sections: the atmosphere, basic respiratory physiology, mountain sickness and a chapter on prevention and treatment of altitude illness. There are 35 figures and 9 tables and a series of appendices provide a glossary, selected bibliography, and biographical data about historical figures. The book is well laid out with very good line drawings and photographs (black and white) throughout. My only criticism of the book design is that the cover is too flimsy. After a few train journeys travelling to London mine had already lost its shape.

Houston covers the most important topics concerning the physiology and medicine associated with altitude hypoxia, limiting himself to a discussion of the problem of oxygen lack rather than considering other aspects of mountain medicine in any detail. It is hard to find much that is missing from the text. Houston introduces historical figures from respiratory physiology and mountain medicine throughout and describes the 'Operation Everest' series of high altitude research studies in some detail. As a paediatrician, I was disappointed to find no serious consideration of children in the sections on acute mountain sickness or high altitude cerebral oedema since the problem of children at altitude is an increasing one. However, as the title suggests, this book is mainly concerned with mountaineering.

In the preface, Houston states that the book is directed at a wide audience, and, indeed, the language makes the text accessible to the educated lay person as well as the interested medical mountaineer. This is no easy task. Houston's book translates the dry physiology and medicine of high altitude hypoxia into a compelling narrative and his chatty style makes it a user-friendly text. One of my favourite lines (which sums up David Murdoch's article in the last edition of this Newsletter) says ".....there's a lot of wiggle room in defining 'too high and too fast'."

There are now several books around which provide information about high altitude physiology. Houston's book will suit those who seek a 'down-to-earth' explanation about high altitude in plain language. With the increasing numbers going to high

altitude regions of the world, the potential audience is huge. It is also a great undergraduate text for students from many different disciplines, including medicine, who are doing projects on high altitude, and need some background information. For the high altitude physiologist, 'Going higher' will not replace the extensively referenced English language texts like Hultgren, or Ward Milledge & West or Heath & Williams but these three books have a small market and are not affordable or so accessible for the lay-enthusiast to dip into. At US\$16.95, Going Higher is one of the better priced High Altitude books and represents excellent value.

If you want an easy-to-read, affordable book about altitude medicine and physiology, you will enjoy reading this one and might want to recommend it to your patients.

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