THE DIFFICULT CASE IN HEAD AND NECK CANCER SURGERY


The Difficult Case in Head and Neck Cancer Surgery by Paul J. Donald is a revised edition of his book Head and Neck Cancer, Management of the Difficult Case published in 1984. As in the previous edition, Dr. Donald himself authored most of the chapters, and this new edition shows in a way how his approach to difficult head and neck cancer cases has evolved over the past couple of decades.

The book reflects Dr. Donald's philosophy throughout most of the chapters. The chapters he wrote have kept the same outline compared to the first edition, except for the chapter on laryngeal cancer (chapter 4), coauthored by Bruce Pearson, which has been rewritten with more detail and is the longest chapter of the book, with 344 references. The revised chapters have been modified, and there has been significant improvement in the number and quality of the illustrations. Additions to the text were made where the senior author felt an update was necessary. Occasionally, paragraphs were completely removed, such as occipital triangle dissection in hypopharyngeal cancer, and superficial temporal to middle cerebral artery anastomosis in cancer of the infratemporal fossa and skull base. Valuable additions to the text and illustrations from his book Surgery of the Skull Base were noted in chapters on cancer of the nose and paranasal sinuses, cancer of the ear and temporal bone, and cancer of the infratemporal fossa and skull base. Although most references from the previous edition were kept, landmark studies have been added, new techniques (sentinel node biopsy for melanoma) mentioned, and significant changes in the disease classification reflected, as noted, for example, in the chapter on pediatric malignancies. Case presentations have been modified to illustrate the updated material discussed in the chapters. Locoregional flaps that may nowadays be of historic significance are retained in this edition and could still be of great value in selected patients despite the significant advances in microvascular reconstruction that have occurred since the previous edition of the book. Chapter 12 on advanced carcinoma of the facial skin, by the senior author, is a great new addition to the book. It is relatively small and condensed but very well written and very well illustrated. It addresses the topics of aggressive, extensive and persistent/recurrent cancer of the skin, with highlights on ablative and reconstructive philosophy and techniques. The chapter on chemotherapy has been completely removed from the new edition. The literature on organ preservation with chemoradiation is mentioned and carefully analyzed in the previous chapters dealing with each site separately as well as in the chapter on radiotherapy (chapter 13) with slightly more details in the section on laryngeal cancer as one would expect.

Although the reader gets to understand the senior author's philosophy on nonsurgical treatment for advanced head and neck cancer throughout the book, a dedicated chapter on chemotherapy with critical review of the current literature would have added a great value to the book. Chapter 13 (advances in radiotherapy for head and neck cancer) has been rewritten by Rachel Chou and Richard Wilder, partly inspired by the outline of the corresponding chapter in the previous edition. It is an up-to-date, well-referenced review of the role of radiotherapy by specific head and neck site, with a concise description of physics, biology, and new advances in radiation oncology of relevance to the head and neck cancer surgeon. Beumer, Roumanas, and Venkatachalam are the new authors of the chapter on restoration of oral and facial defects (chapter 14). The chapter addresses rehabilitation and reconstructive challenges after cancer surgery, in a defect-oriented multidisciplinary approach. It is very well written and very well illustrated despite a few minor editing errors that resulted in inverted figures. Ann Sievers rewrote the chapters on nursing and nutrition, with the new co-authorship of Beverly Lorens on the latter. Both are excellent reviews with updated references and appendices. Finally, the chapter on speech, voice, and swallowing has been modified and updated by the original author, Rebecca Leonard, to reflect the significant changes that have occurred in this field since the previous edition.

Overall, The Difficult Case in Head and Neck Cancer Surgery illustrates Dr. Donald's personal philosophy often favoring radical surgery as a first-line approach followed by radiation. However, the senior author nuances very well what is agreed upon, what is controversial, and what is his own expert opinion. While in his original edition of the textbook “there was little argument that surgery was the most effective therapeutic modality for hypopharyngeal lesions,” he starts his treatment section in the same revised chapter by “in the author's opinion” the most effective form of therapy for hypopharyngeal cancer is radical surgery followed by irradiation. The chapters by Dr. Donald are written in a clear, straightforward style highlighting specific problems and their solutions, almost as if the author is talking to the reader. On dealing with margins on recurrent skin cancer, he
says, “Playing ‘catch-up’ is a difficult problem. When in doubt take more tissue than you think.”

This book, as Dr. Donald mentions in the preface, is not intended for the beginning resident or practitioner who does occasional head and neck surgery. However, it is an excellent source of inspiration for practitioners who often deal with difficult head and neck cases and for junior head and neck cancer surgeons who will learn a lot from reading Dr. Donald’s philosophy and approach to advanced head and neck cancer cases. I would have liked to see him write as well on other difficult issues, such as surgery after failure of nonsurgical treatment. Regardless of whether evidence on nonsurgical modalities still needs to be established, surgeons increasingly have to deal with persistent and recurrent disease after nonsurgical treatment. An expert opinion on this topic would have added a great value to this book, in the form of a dedicated chapter with information similar to what is presented in the new chapter on skin cancer.

While other treatments can be somewhat standardized, surgery depends a lot on the surgeon’s philosophy, comfort level, and experience. From that perspective, books reflecting decades of personal experience in head and neck surgery become very important references. After all, there is not much evidence available when dealing with advanced difficult head and neck cancer, especially after inadequate or unsuccessful previous treatment. It takes someone with the experience and expertise of Dr. Donald to write a book on difficult head and neck cancer cases, and although it is not an all-inclusive head and neck cancer textbook, it is a very valuable reference for head and neck surgeons.

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