Foreword

Prior to the twentieth century, the great weight of medical thought concerned the process of distinguishing one disease from another in order to establish a prognosis. In our era of advanced technology, the emphasis in medicine, especially a surgical subspecialty such as otolaryngology, focuses excessively upon determining what intervention offers a patient the best chance of cure and too little upon the art and science of diagnosis. According to the American poet Edward Hodnett (1841–1920): “If you do not ask the right questions, you do not get the right answers. A question asked in the right way often points to its own answer. Asking questions is the A-B-C of diagnosis. Only the inquiring mind solves problems.”

This text, edited by Professors Stewart and Selesnick, seeks to guide the otolaryngologist to pose the right questions by refocusing attention upon the fundamentals of diagnosis (history, physical examination, laboratory data, and imaging), in order to reach thoughtful and accurate answers by which to guide application of modern therapies.

It is a widely quoted myth in medicine that differential diagnosis is primarily the domain of cognitive specialties such as internal medicine and neurology. Some would have you believe that surgeons “think only from the elbow down” and tend to derive pleasure from acting quickly and decisively rather than cogitating over complex medical differentials. To the contrary, the spectrum of diseases encountered by the otolaryngologist is as intricate and variable as those in any medical field—except that they occur in a highly compact region of byzantine anatomical complexity.

In most specialties, the clinician needs to master a single organ system. In otolaryngology, as a regional specialty of the head and neck, the clinician needs to be concerned with disorders of four special senses (hearing, balance, smell, taste), as well as functionalities as diverse as voice, swallowing, breathing, facial expression, etc. This wide spectrum of disease presentations—from minor malady to critical illness, from young to old, involving men or women, etc.—makes the study of differential diagnosis especially relevant to the otolaryngologist.

This new text is a tour de force of 82 chapters that comprehensively cover the entire field of otolaryngology from alopecia to vertigo. The organization of the chapter by symptom, rather than by disease process, facilitates practical application of the knowledge to aid diagnosis in both the clinic and at the bedside. This volume should be of value not only for students and residents seeking to learn otolaryngology for
the first time, but also to seasoned practitioners seeking to enhance their diagnostic acumen. The eminent diagnostician Sir William Osler once said: “The value of experience is not in seeing much, but in seeing wisely.” The quest for sophistication in differential diagnosis leads the wise physician down the path of better serving his or her patients.

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Although otolaryngologists–head and neck surgeons are drawn to medicine for many reasons, we all share a singular and profound sense of responsibility for our patients. Yet it is indeed a challenge to keep abreast of advances in diagnosis and therapeutics and to meet the expectations to which we hold ourselves and to which we are held by the public. The breadth and depth of otolaryngology–head and neck surgery continue to expand. As otolaryngologists, we now require a knowledge base that includes not just the established core of our field, but also sleep medicine, esophageal disorders, allergies, and skull base surgery, to name a few areas unfamiliar to our predecessors. The knowledge base in all areas of our field is increasingly voluminous as new studies add to the literature. Furthermore, time can separate patients with rare disorders; accordingly, our memories may fade regarding what differential diagnoses to consider.

It seems, at times, that therapeutic advances overshadow the fundamentals of diagnostic skills in otolaryngology and other medical specialties. Evolving technologies are exciting and innovative but are useless to a patient with no diagnosis. In the office, at the bedside, and in the emergency department, patients present to us with symptoms and signs, which are the clues that trigger our thoughts and ultimately our recommendations.

This book is intended to offer the clinician a practical resource for the formulation of a differential diagnosis. Although other texts on this topic exist, one distinguishing feature of Differential Diagnosis in Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery is its innovative design. The text is organized around symptoms, the most fundamental information that our patients give us. Within the text the reader will find a hierarchical organization of potential diagnoses that are symptom based. In addition, the reader will find clear links to other areas of the text that should be considered for a given complaint.

We are proud to have the contributions of some of the brightest minds in our field in Differential Diagnosis in Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery. It has been our pleasure to work with these contributors.

The editors and contributors hope that this book will be a useful addition to the tools each of us has available in the evaluation of patients with otolaryngologic complaints, and that ultimately, the use of this resource will translate into the best possible outcome for each patient who entrusts us with his or her care.

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