

“Animal-type Melanoma” and “Entities” Related to It: Exegesis of a Subject Until Now Incomprehensible. Contrary View on Behalf of Patients

Milette F, Ackerman AB. New York, NY: Ardor Scribendi; 2006. 62 pp. ISBN 1-893357-30-9, UPC 9781893357303. \$20.00. Available at www.derm101.com.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines the term *borderline* as follows:

1. The strip of land along the border between two countries or districts; a frontier-line; often fig., the boundary between areas, classes, etc.
2. Attrib. or as adj. Occupying a borderline; esp. in phr. border-line case; spec. (a) verging on the indecent or obscene; (b) verging on insanity.

From the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Copyright © Oxford University Press 2007. Available at: <http://www.oed.com>. Accessed June 16, 2007.

The *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary* defines *borderline* in this way:

1. Situated at or near a border line <a borderline town>.
- 2a. Situated between two points or states: INTERMEDIATE <mental borderline states between dream and wakefulness—Joséf Wittlin> b. verging on one or the other place or state without being definitely assignable to either one: MARGINAL <a borderline district that was neither opulent nor impoverished>; especially: not quite average, standard, or normal <a person of borderline intelligence> c. not quite meeting or conforming to accepted patterns (as of good taste or morality); especially: verging on the indecent or obscene <a borderline joke> <a borderline book> d. not clearly fixed or convincing: subject to challenge or debate: DUBIOUS, QUESTIONABLE <in their opinion the new theory is of borderline validity> e. manifesting typical but not altogether conclusive characteristics: apparently

existent but lacking definitive development <a patient with borderline diabetes> <attempting some sort of borderline economy>.

From *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*. Merriam-Webster; 2002. Available at: <http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com>. Accessed June 16, 2007.

Since the 1980s, when I entered the field of dermatopathology, I began to grapple with the problem of the so-called *borderline* tumor. My initial query centered on the problem of just what was meant by such a term. Was it that the *tumor* was *borderline* in nature—that is, metaphysically? That proposition never made sense to me because things in nature are specific, concrete, real. There could be no *borderline* in that sphere. Alternatively, did *borderline* refer to a *classification* scheme? In other words, did the term refer to a conceptual way of organizing those concrete things that some authors referred to as *borderline*? This, it turns out, is the authentic meaning of the term; it is a conceptual reference, not a metaphysical one.

In this regard, the *Oxford English Dictionary’s* definition #2 comes close to the meaning, to the degree that it is concerned with conceptual matters. The Merriam-Webster definition #2 also comes close to the conceptual meaning, especially definition #2d. The meaning, as it pertains to tumor classification in dermatopathology, is that some tumors are difficult to classify; they have features of one class of clearly defined tumors, but they also have features of another class of clearly defined tumors. Sometimes, the conceptual conflict is between classes of tumors that are malignant and benign. Therefore, to what class do the tumors in question belong? What are they? How does one attempt to answer such a question? Logic dictates that the tumor in question is either malignant or benign, but not both or neither. Even if the lesion in question is a so-called *low-grade malignancy*, it is still a malignancy.

Now come François Milette, MD, and A. Bernard Ackerman, MD, to weigh in on “animal-type melanoma” and “entities” related to it. This soft-cover monograph, at 62 pages with references, specifically addresses my quandary about

the concept of *borderline*, but the work is true to its title, and it is done with the usual flare that one has come to expect from the pen of Dr. Ackerman. This work, however, is a true collaboration. Anyone familiar with Dr. Milette’s writings knows well of his interest in philosophy, and the implicit reference to Aristotle’s Law of Excluded Middle (page 50) is unmistakable.

This monograph is difficult to read; it is highly technical. It will thus appeal only to those who are interested in following a line of detailed argument through a number of historical (and confusing) articles on the subject referred to in the title. It truly is an exegesis of the topic. An exegesis refers to an “exposition or explanation; especially: critical interpretation of a text or portion of Scripture” (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*. Merriam-Webster; 2002. Available at: <http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com>. Accessed June 3, 2007). For those who believe that the term *animal-type melanoma* refers to a specific type of neoplasm, an exegesis is sorely needed, because those who have written on the subject previously have required faith, rather than reason, to advance their viewpoints on the subject.

The monograph is divided into two parts, with a foreword and afterword. Part 1 is a review of the historical articles related directly to the concept of animal melanoma, how the concept evolved in research articles of primary case material, and how it was integrated into various textbooks. Part 2 is focused on the concept of animal-type melanoma and its conceptual connections to *epithelioid blue nevus* and *pigmented epithelioid melanocytoma*.

The method of exposition is my favorite. The authors summarize the concept of animal-type melanoma by going to its roots, by summarizing all of the historical articles, and by commenting on them. In some cases, photographs of the articles are published with key elements of the text, verbatim, of the articles that are quoted.

For the first time, the authors show the root article from William Dick, VS, who wrote a letter to *The Lancet* in October 1832. It is a delight to see a

facsimile of the article reprinted, and it is obvious from the text that there was no clear concept of the meaning of the term used by Dick. Through a progression of painstaking analysis, the authors strip bare the articles referring to *equine melanotic disease*, *pilar neurocristic hamartoma*, *animal-type melanoma*, *pigmented epithelioid melanocytoma*, and *epithelioid blue nevus*; they show how inconsistently terminology has been used for these concepts, and how a simple (but not simplistic) approach is preferable—namely, malignant, benign, malignant with benign, or *I don't know*. They toss *borderline* out completely. It is beyond the scope of this review for me to detail their elegant analysis of these articles, but it is worth the reader's time to read it carefully and thoughtfully.

I have minor points of criticism about the format of the book. I believe it is better suited for the Demy Octavo ($8\frac{3}{4}$ " by $5\frac{5}{8}$ ") format because it is a work of criticism and is not so much like a conventional textbook. It is the type of work one reads in one session in utter privacy, requiring an intimate environment. In this same vein, a smaller book requires narrower columns and results in

easier scanning of the page, which would have worked well here. There are not many photographs, so there was no real requirement for a larger book. I also tend to like indented paragraphs or paragraphs separated by double spaces, because of the ease of identifying one expression of thought from another. In the manner the material is presented, there is no separation of paragraphs except by ending line, thus producing a somewhat unconventional presentation that I found difficult to follow.

Who should buy this book? In my opinion, those who will probably disagree the most with it should read it and think deeply about it. There is much to consider by reading one's critics, provided the criticism is *ad rem* and not *ad hominem*. The authors of this book are highly critical of those authors who have advanced the concept of animal-type melanoma and who have linked it conceptually to borderline melanocytic proliferations, pigmented epithelioid melanocytoma, and the newer evaluation of the meaning of epithelioid blue nevus. The work, however, is not *ad hominem*, despite its emotionally charged text. I believe also that dermatopathologists with about 10 years of experience in daily

sign-out of biopsy specimens will benefit from reading the book now, because it may help to challenge their thinking about classification schemes by showing them how historical perspective is applied properly in developing a concept and exposing the flaws of a concept. I believe also, however, that those who are in dermatology or pathology residencies, or even in dermatopathology fellowships, will not benefit greatly from reading this work—yet. They will need seasoning by the challenges of practice to appreciate the problems addressed in this work. I suggest to them that they buy it now, attempt to read it now, read it after 5 years of practice, then after 10, and discover for themselves the meaning after each period of practice.

Some works are written only for the range of the moment. Others, such as this one, will be relevant years from now because they deal with timeless issues taken in historical perspective. This is why this monograph is important, and this is why it should be taken seriously.

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