COMMENT: In 1966, Rett described a progressive dementia in girls with onset in early childhood and associated with autistic behaviour, apraxia of gait, and stereotyped use of the hands. The cause of Rett's syndrome is unknown. I have seen several atypical cases that fit the description except for the absence of so-called pathognomonic hand wringing movements and hyperventilation, and some were boys. Is Rett's syndrome a specific disorder or nonspecific, with more than one etiology? For a review of Rett syndrome, refer to Ann J Med Genet 1986 (suppl).

DYSLEXIA AND LEARNING DISABILITIES

GENETICS AND READING DISABILITIES

Psychologists and psychiatrists at the University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey, and the Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, London, UK studied the reading skills of 285 pairs of 13 year-old twins using standardized measures of intelligence, reading and spelling ability and correlations in monozygotic and same-sex dizygotic twins. Genetic factors played only a moderate role in general reading backwardness and specific reading retardationwhereas strong genetic influences for spelling disability were found. (Stevenson J, Graham P, Fredman G, McLoughlin V. A twin study of genetic influences on reading and spelling ability and disability. J Child Psychol Psychiat. 1987; 28:229-247)

COMMENT: Of a total of 96 twin pairs reported in the literature, 36 (88%) monozygotic twins and only 16 (29%) dizygotic twins were concordant for dyslexia (Dyslexia: as the Neurologist and Educator read it. Charles C Thomas, Springfield, Illinois, USA, 1986). Between 25 and 50% of children with reading disability demonstrate transmission within families. Hallgren (1950) concluded that his data best fitted an autosomal dominant genetic mechanism and others have proposed alternative genetic models: autosomal dominant with reduced penetrance in females, and sex-linked recessive. These studies are at variance with the present authors' conclusions that emphasise the complexity of genetic influences on literacy skills and the importance of changes that occur with development in our understanding of the causation of reading difficulties.

ADDITIVES AND HYPERKINETIC BEHAVIOUR

The authors studied 39 children with hyperkinetic and learning disorders in a summer camp setting. The behaviour was monitored by videotape for 4-minute intervals at mealtimes. The Feingold diet was administered for 1 week followed by a diet containing additives and preservatives for 1 week. Three observers who were blind to the respective diet periods rated the behaviour for motor restlessness, disorganised behaviour, and misbehaviour. No significant differences were found in behaviour during weeks 1 and 2. The authors conclude that the Feingold Diet has no beneficial effect on most children with learning and hyperkinetic diisorders. (Gross MD, Tofanelli RA, Butzirus SM, Snodgrass EW. J Amer Acad Child Adol Psychiat. 1987; 26:53-55)