Book Review

The COBE Story

In the 1980s, few names were bigger in the perfusion industry than COBE. Started in 1964 as a custom heart–lung tubing pack supplier, COBE blossomed into a worldwide manufacturer of perfusion, dialysis, and blood processing devices. For the most part, The COBE Story is a biographical account of the people involved in the company’s 26-year history. Chapter 1 introduces the reader to Bob Collins and Ran Bellows, the company’s principle founders, and highlights the use of their last names to derive the word COBE. The next several chapters recount the company’s meteoric rise in growth. Expansion efforts in the late 1960s, for example, included developing a smoother perfusion connector, devising tubing forceps to replace the flimsy hemostats, and acquiring the distribution rights of the Polystan (Rygg) bag oxygenator. Chapter 5 focuses exclusively on COBE’s evolving cardiovascular product line such as the Galen Optiflo bubble oxygenator (beginning in 1974), the Stockert heart–lung machine (beginning in 1977), and the CML line of membrane oxygenators (beginning in 1982). Less interesting to perfusionists, perhaps, is COBE’s pursuit of the dialysis market featured in Chapter 6. The reading gets a bit slow in Chapter 7, which discusses COBE’s international operations. However, colorful employees are introduced and humorous stories are told of the challenges of doing business overseas. COBE’s cell washing and apheresis product lines form the basis of Chapter 8, including a lengthy section outlining the 1984 acquisition of IBM’s blood processing business. IBM, quite literally, pioneered the techniques of blood cell washing and separation in the early 1970s (along with Haemonetics). Toward the end of the 1980s, COBE’s strategic position and market share began to erode. The reasons for this are skillfully laid out in Chapters 9 and 10, including increased U.S. Food and Drug Administration oversight, reduced dialyzer demand resulting from reusability, and declining profit margins in the cardiovascular market. The book culminates with the merger of COBE and Gambro AB, a Swedish medical device manufacturer, in June of 1990.

I highly recommend this book, especially to perfusionists who practiced in the 1970s and 1980s. It was during this time that oxygenation moved from bubbler to membrane, and COBE’s easy-to-prime open-system parallel-plate CML played a huge role in this. For entry-level perfusionists, this book offers a rare glimpse into the manufacturing side of our profession. Collins’ “storytelling” style of writing is easy to follow, and the numerous employees featured throughout the book suggest that COBE was more than just a perfusion company. Rather, it was a close-knit family that made significant contributions to medicine and had fun doing it.

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