A CLINICAL GUIDE TO EPILEPTIC SYNDROMES
AND THEIR TREATMENT
By C. P. Panayiotopoulos

The recognition of epilepsy syndromes and attempts at their
classification has led to a burgeoning literature in this area.
This body of research represents one of the most important
advances in epileptology over the last 20 years. The addition
of neuroradiological insights and, more recently, genetic
discoveries have both enhanced our ability to diagnose and
classify epilepsy syndromes and to understand their neuro-
biology.

Regarding the idiopathic epilepsies, where there is no
known underlying brain lesion, neuroimaging, by definition,
is negative (but it is helpful to rule out other disorders) and
genetic studies are only beginning to unravel the complexities
therein. There remains a heated but productive dispute as to
the best way of categorizing the patients and the recognition
of what does or does not constitute a relatively specific
syndrome.

For the clinician, whether an expert in epilepsy or a general
neurologist, synthesized information about this is relatively
sparse. Textbooks of epileptology often tend to deal with the
issue in a relatively patchy manner, reflective of the usual
multi-authorship problem. The standard resource has been the
‘Guide Bleu’ [Roger et al. (eds) Epileptic syndromes in
It has strengths in terms of the authority of the authorship but
the detail and usefulness of chapters vary as is common in
multi-author volumes. The present work is the first single-
author attempt to cover this important area. Panayiotopoulos
has been an active and vigorous participant in the quest for
identification of epilepsy syndromes. This book represents his
personal view of the area, guided by recent proposals from the
International League Against Epilepsy’s Commission on
Classification and Terminology.

The book begins with a general overview of the approach
to the diagnosis of epileptic seizures and epilepsy syndromes.
This is a wonderful primer that residents and house officers in
neurology should read. More seasoned consultants could also
certainly benefit. Of particular value is the summary of the
appropriate use and potential abuse of the EEG. Although it
remains the backbone of the investigation of epilepsy, EEG
has been over shadowed by the spectacular advances in
imaging. This chapter provides an authoritative and prag-
matic view of the role of this still essential, but often
inappropriately used, investigation.

Thereafter follows eight chapters dealing predominantly
with idiopathic epilepsies in the neonatal period, infancy,
childhood and adolescence, as well as one chapter on the
symptomatic focal epilepsies. Chapter 2 is devoted to
neonatal epilepsies. There is a brief but useful description
of the clinical and EEG manifestations of seizures in the
neonate. A description of the relatively newly recognized
epilepsy syndromes of the neonatal period is given, supple-
mented by an appendix of non-epileptic disorders that can be
mistaken for epilepsies. Chapter 3 deals with seizures in the
infantile period including febrile seizures, West syndrome
and a number of rarer disorders. The discussion of febrile
seizures is relatively superficial, and this very common
problem is given as much space as disorders that hitherto
have only been described in small a number of cases.

Chapter 4 deals with the Lennox Gastaut syndrome. The
difficulty in accurately defining this well-known disorder is
lucidly discussed. Exactly what the Lennox Gastaut syn-
drome is, is a point of debate, and the problems in definition
together with the classical descriptions of the disorder are
clearly presented. Chapter 5 deals with benign childhood
focal seizures, an area where Panayiotopoulos has made
major personal contributions. At the end, the author presents
his personal synthesis of ‘age-related childhood susceptibility
to seizures’. Although this is presented as an hypothesis it has
also been written up in more detail in previous publications
and perhaps would have been better left out in this ‘Clinical
guide’.

Chapter 6 deals with the idiopathic generalized epilepsies
and contains a useful, detailed description of seizure types in
these syndromes, followed by a description of the well-
recognized epilepsy syndromes within this group. Thereafter
follows an account of some more controversial entities, some
described by Panayiotopoulos himself. It is indicated that
these are not generally accepted; time will tell whether they
are shown to be independent neurological entities.

Chapter 7 describes some of the new familial focal
epilepsies. This is a rapidly moving area but this chapter is
fairly up to date and gives a flavour of these emerging entities
for which the molecular basis is known in some. Chapter 8
deals with the symptomatic epilepsies such as temporal lobe
epilepsies and frontal lobe epilepsies due to known or
suspected lesions. The semiology of these seizures is well
described and a personal view of the medical therapy of these
entities is given. Surgical treatment is not discussed. Finally,
in Chapter 9 the reflex epilepsies, particularly photosensitive
epilepsy, are described.

The book is extremely well referenced. This alone provides
a useful source to the literature. Good use is made of
published guidelines. It compares favourably with the ‘Guide
Bleu’ in terms of content and references. It is attractively
presented, with colours used to highlight aspects such as
definitions and some controversial issues. It is well illustrated
with EEGs and some images. There is understandably a bias
in emphasis towards disorders that Panayiotopoulos has
made a particular contribution to, and in some cases, the
description of syndromes is not associated with an indication
about the current acceptance of these by others, but, for the
most part, the representations are fair and balanced.

The volume will be useful to those who wish to look up the
features of particular disorders, both from the descriptions
that are well written and illustrated and the accompanying
references. The book will appear more daunting to a trainee or
inexperienced neurologist when trying to find which particular syndrome the patient in front of him may have. This is a common flaw in such compilations of complex disorders like the epilepsies. Moreover, the problem of how to deal with the patients who do not fit into the current scheme is not addressed. These criticisms do not detract from the overall value of the book however, which adds to this growing and important field.

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