

Book review

Current Problems in Epilepsy series, Vol. 15, Benign Childhood Partial Seizures and Related Epileptic Syndromes, by C.P. Panayiotopoulos, John Libbey, London, 1999.

The 15th volume in the Current Problems in Epilepsy series is a gem. Dr Tom Panayiotopoulos has produced an extraordinary monograph, which summarises much of his considerable personal academic achievement over 25 years. All his work was undertaken independent of the influence of the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Queen Square, and his clarity and independence of thought shines through the book. He encourages us to embrace a revolution in our attitude to epilepsy. His premise is that patients are entitled to an accurate diagnosis – at present few patients in the UK get much further than a diagnosis of ‘epilepsy’ and in at least one fifth even this is wrong! As he says in his first paragraph, “‘Epilepsy’ is not a single disease entity. Epilepsies encompass many diseases. The fundamental rules of diagnosis, which apply to all other physical diseases, are often ignored in the epilepsies. The short- and long-term management of epilepsies is syndrome-related and often differs markedly between various disorders manifesting with seizures, emphasising the need for accurate diagnosis.’ Here is the antidote to the nihilism regarding diagnosis common for those with epilepsy in the UK today; he presents us with carefully crafted, thought-provoking arguments, and with practical tips on diagnosis and management of common epilepsies.

After an excellent short chapter on the usefulness of the EEG, which covers, with examples, the importance of provision of clinical information, interpretation of the EEG in clinical context and value of the EEG after first seizure, there follow the 12 chapters on benign childhood seizure susceptibility syndrome, which make up the core of the book. This is the term he coins to unite benign childhood occipital, centrotemporal, frontal and parietal epilepsies with their diverse, fascinating clinical manifestations (all described in detail). In this section there are some beautiful clinical vignettes accompanied by EEG recordings. The description in chapter 6 of visual symptoms in seizures should be read by all neurologists in training, as it

is an important subject which receives scant attention in current texts. Dr Panayiotopoulos also tackles such difficult subjects as ictal vomiting and ictal headache; then there is, of course, a chapter on his own syndrome (early onset benign childhood occipital seizures or Panayiotopoulos syndrome), which is the second commonest of the benign childhood epilepsy after Rolandic seizures. This syndrome is characterised by infrequent seizures associated with eye deviation, vomiting, retching, coughing, speech arrest, cyanosis, oropharyngolaryngeal movements and incontinences of urine. Such seizures may last hours and are usually nocturnal. These are contrasted in the next chapter with late onset benign childhood occipital seizures, which are characterised by elementary visual hallucinations and/or blindness followed sometimes by convulsions. Later in the book there are chapters on the EEG in benign childhood epilepsies, reflex epilepsies and photosensitive occipital seizures. Tom Panayiotopoulos’ vast clinical experience enables him to use personal insight to give practical clues to the diagnosis, not only of the epilepsies, but also of difficult borderland between epilepsy and migraine. He also gives us a heartening and amusing insight into the frustrations of trying to get good work published in peer reviewed journals. Hidden at the back of the book are chapters on basilar migraine and acquired epileptic aphasia, adequately supported by literature review and personal cases.

The prose is wonderfully readable and never dull. It is rare these days to find an author willing to commit himself on practical issues – perhaps because most academics tend to neglect their clinical practice. The knowledge imparted in this volume is the result of vast personal clinical experience.

Do not be misled by the title of the book – there is much more here than Benign Childhood Partial epilepsy, itself a subject with which all paediatricians and adult neurologists should be conversant. Tom Panayiotopoulos writes with great authority, and justifiably so, as his list of first author publications amply illustrates. Here is an author who has accepted no received wisdom, but rather through painstaking study of EEG and clinical manifestations has come to understand the epilepsies. There are no neurologists or neurophysiologists in the UK who could rival his

depth and breadth of experience in the subject. It is a very personal view of the epilepsies that he portrays. This may annoy a few who might disagree with him

on some point or other – but so much the better for that! Highly recommended.

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