110 Puzzling Cases of Epilepsy

edited by D. Schmidt and S.C. Schachter, 451 pp., Martin Dunitz, \$80.80, 2002

In their 2002 volume *110 Puzzling Cases of Epilepsy*, Drs. Dieter Schmidt and Steven Schachter have compiled the collective wisdom and experiences of over 100 of the world's foremost epilepsy clinicians and researchers. Their goal in launching this effort was quite simple: to glean from the minds of the experts that one case that changed their practice or taught them an invaluable lesson that is inaccessible through any textbook or epilepsy algorithm. To accomplish this goal, they solicited a single case from a number of well-known epileptologists, instructing them to include a commentary on what they learned and how it changed their clinical practice. The resultant text is an insightful compendium of clinical vignettes, filled with unusual diagnoses, treatments, and outcomes, and tempered by humility and the respect for the unknown that every physician must have in this practice of medicine.

While today's push for evidence-based medicine is certainly positive, Drs. Schmidt and Schachter submit that the case-based approach to medical practice is still vitally important. In fact, the best clinicians are often defined by an ability to consider and recognize unusual diagnoses or to construct novel therapeutic regimens. Algorithmic thinking suffices for mere competence, but true clinical acumen requires the keen observation and intuition that come only from experience and

dedication. This volume of vignettes aims to capture glimpses of this experience and dedication from the experts themselves. While structured similarly, each case in this volume imparts an observational style and voice that is unique to the author. The result is a different lesson with each turn of the page, often defying convention. Although the cases are all unique, the similarity is this: a practice born from years of experience, not from a textbook or accepted set of guidelines.

Despite the heterogeneity of the cases, the text is loosely organized by the salient learning points: difficult diagnoses, unusual causes of a known syndrome, unforeseen complications of testing or treatment, and novel treatments or outcomes. Additionally, each case is structured identically, including a detailed history, investigations, diagnosis, and treatment/outcome. Although each vignette is unique, these sections are fairly standard, detailing the necessary epilepsy evaluations that any of us would seek. Of course, these sections are vital for unlocking the eventual diagnosis and for setting the clinical scene. However, the unique flavor from each case clearly comes from the authors' commentary. In these sections, the authors describe why they chose this particular case, what they learned, and how it changed their practice. These expositions give the authors license to impart their unique personal expertise in a nonformulaic manner.

Does the volume succeed? Although it will have less utility as a day-to-day reference, the book certainly accomplishes its goal. The case-based approach lends itself

to easy reading, and the spectrum of clinical entities included is extensive; you will not find yourself reading about the same scenario twice. In my opinion, the most valuable section is the author's commentary, the one section where the expert's true voice comes through to the reader. The styles of these sections are as varied as the personalities of their authors, but the lessons are all equally valuable. These are not lessons learned from a textbook, and at times, they break the normal algorithmic convention of epilepsy diagnosis and treatment. Perhaps the overall message is this: Experience teaches us always to be wary of the unexpected and to always keep the mind open for unusual circumstances, diagnoses, or treatments. The most memorable commentaries from the book resonate with humility—the author conveying the message that one can never be overly confident without performing a full investigation and keeping an open mind. Perhaps this is one of the qualities that best define an “expert”—the recognition that no matter how much experience one has, there is always a new lesson to be learned.

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