The aim of medicine is to diagnose, prevent and treat (alleviate or cure) human diseases. Accurate diagnosis is a prerequisite and the golden rule for meaningful treatment.

Imitators of epileptic seizures are a broad spectrum of episodic manifestations that mimic, “look like” but are not, epileptic seizures. They range from normal phenomena, such as hypnagogic jerks, hallucinations or illusions, to a galaxy of abnormal paroxysmal symptoms of a variety of brain and systemic disorders. Imitators of epileptic seizures occur at any age, but their highest incidence is seen in childhood, particularly during the first years of life.

Misdiagnosis of imitators of epileptic seizures as genuine epilepsy is a colossal problem affecting as many as 20–30% of patients diagnosed with, and often treated for many years for, epilepsy or admitted to tertiary care epilepsy units. The problem is complicated by the fact that approximately 30% of patients with genuine epileptic seizures also suffer from non-epileptic, mainly psychogenic, seizures.

Conversely, nearly all types of epileptic seizures can imitate non-epileptic paroxysmal events. The result is avoidable morbidity and sometimes mortality.

Distinguishing epileptic from non-epileptic disorders is fundamental to diagnosis and a classical example of differential diagnosis is the monumental book of William Richard Gowers published in 1907, *The Border-land of Epilepsy: Faints, Vagal Attacks, Vertigo, Migraine, Sleep Symptoms and their Treatment*. Today, the diagnosis of epilepsy and its imitators still relies principally on clinical history.

The clinical diagnosis is often easy and secured if individual elements of clinical events are meaningfully synthesised with regard to quantity, quality, location, onset, chronological sequence, development, speed of progress and duration. An inadequate history is the most common reason for misdiagnosis.

This concise booklet provides a physician-friendly modern review of the imitators of epileptic seizures with particular emphasis on key points of clinical significance. The aim is to assist healthcare professionals in optimising the differential diagnosis of epileptic from non-epileptic attacks and prevent misdiagnosis and incorrect treatment.

March 2012 Oxford C.P. Panayiotopoulos, M.D., Ph.D., F.R.C.P.
Imitators of epileptic seizures
Panayiotopoulos, C.P.
2012, XIV, 73 p. 2 illus. in color., Softcover
ISBN: 978-1-4471-4022-1