From theory to practice: Critical points in the 2017 ILAE classification of epileptic seizures and epilepsies


1Department of Clinical Neurosciences, School of Medicine, Pontificia Universidade Catolica do Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS), Porto Alegre, Brazil
2Porto Alegre Epilepsy Surgery Program, Hospital São Lucas, Pontificia Universidade Catolica do Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS), Porto Alegre, Brazil
3Department of Neurology, School of Medicine, International University of Health and Welfare, Fukuoka, Japan
4Epilepsy Center Kork, Kehl, Germany
5Medical Faculty of the University of Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany
6Epilepsy Center Frankfurt Rhine-Main, Center of Neurology and Neurosurgery, Center for Personalized Translational Epilepsy Research (CePTER), University Hospital Frankfurt, Goethe University Frankfurt, Frankfurt, Germany
7Department of Neurology, General Hospital Hietzing With Neurological Center Rosenhuegel, Karl Landsteiner Institute for Clinical Epilepsy Research and Cognitive Neurology, Medical Faculty, Sigmund Freud University, Vienna, Austria
8University of South Florida and Tampa General Hospital, Tampa, Florida
9Department of Neurological Sciences, Section of Epilepsy, Rush University Medical Center, Chicago, Illinois
10Department of Neurosciences, Neurology Department, Luxembourg Hospital Center, Luxembourg City, Luxembourg
11Westmead Clinical School, University of Sydney, Wentworthville, New South Wales, Australia
12St Elizabeth Mercy Hospital, Youngstown, Ohio
13Brno Epilepsy Center, Department of Neurology, St Anne’s University Hospital and Faculty of Medicine, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic
14Epilepsy Unit, Hospital Clinic, Barcelona, Spain
15Department of Neurology, Beaumont Hospital, Dublin, Ireland
16Department of Neurology, McGovern School of Medicine, University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, Houston, Texas
17UCL Queen Square Institute of Neurology, University College London, London, UK
18Epilepsy Program, Ruber International Hospital, Madrid, Spain
Dr Fisher and colleagues have recently provided a commentary on our critique of the 2017 International League Against Epilepsy (ILAE) classification of epileptic seizures and epilepsies. The commentary was disappointing in that it did not depart from their original views and suggests a lack of engagement to consider an alternative framework that might improve the ILAE classifications of epileptic seizures and the epilepsies.

Epileptologists actively dealing with people with epilepsy must provide feedback and express their views on any official ILAE position, as the latter would only be valid if it succeeds in striking a balance between the perspectives of any ILAE commission and that of the practitioners. It is evident that thoughtful critiques of ILAE position papers can only be forwarded once a text is published and their directions put into use, which is what we did in our critique, in an effort to achieve the best synthesis of accumulated knowledge that could result in a practical, useful, and forward-looking classification of epileptic seizures and the epilepsies.

1 | GENESIS OF CLASSIFICATIONS

In topics such as a classification of seizures, theoretical objective approaches need to be tempered with frontline experience dealing with patients, families, and referring doctors. A balanced view in a classification of epileptic seizures and epilepsies should seek to incorporate (1) nomenclature and concepts that are simple and easy to understand and communicate, (2) advances in technology and genetics, (3) new concepts, and especially (4) accumulated experience from
managing individuals with epilepsy. A successful classification is not imposed by diktat, but must evolve iteratively, taking into account feedback from the community.

2 | TERMINOLOGY AND THE WORLDWIDE USEFULNESS OF A CLASSIFICATION

If an ILAE classification is to target the international community, it must carefully choose its wording, both to facilitate communication and to encourage proper diagnosis. Terminology that is not easily understood by those for whom English is not their first language should be avoided. Terms such as "focal aware," "focal impaired awareness," and "nonmotor cognitive," for example, are complicated and unintuitive. As a consequence, many general neurologists, nurses, and others working with persons with epilepsy will likely not incorporate this terminology and end up simply classifying a seizure as either focal or generalized. The result is that by shortcutting simple semiological features, a practitioner may misclassify focal seizures as generalized attacks, because features of a seizure with generalized movements or disconnection from the environment have the greatest importance for patients and relatives when they describe seizures to a doctor or a nurse, and this may lead to suboptimal treatment.

We suggest that ILAE should reflect upon this unfortunate consequence when choosing the framework of a seizure classification and its terminology. This situation could be circumvented by encouraging professionals dealing with people with epilepsy to add simple semiological features, as suggested by the four-dimension epilepsy classification (4D-EC) scheme.5 In other words, if nurses, general practitioners, and neurologists are encouraged to report the order of events, and not focus purely on the most dramatic and obvious aspects of a seizure, diagnosis would be more precise and mistreatment would be less likely. Because listing the semiological sequence of seizures is part of the 4D-EC, health providers would be encouraged to identify the semiological evolution of epileptic seizures, which is not difficult; all that is needed is to ask patients or witnesses.

Terminology needs to be clear and to avoid confusion. Let us analyze this paragraph, from the ILAE seizure classification scheme 2: “For example: a seizure beginning with sudden inability to understand language followed by impaired awareness and clonic left arm jerks would be classified as a 'focal impaired awareness (nonmotor onset) cognitive seizure' (progressing to clonic left arm jerks). The terms in parentheses are optional. The seizure type in this example is determined by the cognitive nonmotor onset and presence of altered awareness during any point of the seizure.” This is an example of wording that may confuse more than help. This seizure consists of dysphasia, disconnection, and focal clonic movements of one arm. In the 4D-EC, it would be classified as follows: ictal aphasic→disconnection (loss of awareness)→left arm clonic seizure. This classification perspective gives the practitioner much more information than a "focal impaired awareness cognitive seizure" (which could mean any ictal cognitive abnormality and thus originate from very different cortical regions). Furthermore, because the patient evolved to disconnection from the environment, the 2017 ILAE nomenclature ignores that the patient was aware of a language difficulty at seizure onset. These problems are inevitable if one uses a single word or expression such as “focal impaired awareness (nonmotor onset) cognitive seizure” to designate different features. The choice of the ILAE classification commission to lump together focal seizures does not encourage a true understanding of what is going on and where in the brain. We think this reduces understanding and impoverishes doctor-patient interactions in epileptology, an area where patients are often perplexed with what suddenly happens to them and seek explanations. Furthermore, classifying the example above as "focal impaired awareness cognitive seizure" simply "crystallizes" something that is dynamic. This confuses even the treatment outcome, as an antiepileptic drug (AED) regimen may control the more disabling motor aspects of the seizure, which are not even mentioned in its classification. For instance, seizures could change after AED from aphasic→disconnection (loss of awareness)→left arm clonic seizure to aphasic seizure only, which changes the putative morbidity and practical impact of the seizures. With the ILAE epilepsy classification, seizures would appear unchanged or would need to be recategorized as "focal aware cognitive seizure." This conundrum can be avoided by using semiology evolution as proposed in the 4D-EC,5,6 which is more helpful in understanding the dynamic nature of seizures, explaining the treatment goals, and assessing the results of treatment.

3 | FOCAL VERSUS GENERALIZED SEIZURES, LOCATION OF EPILEPTOGENIC ZONE, AND HOW TO ENCOURAGE REASONING

A pure semiological seizure classification, assessing what happens at seizure onset and during evolution, provides neurologists with an anatomofunctional perspective when taking the clinical history. This leads to one dimension of localization of the epileptogenic zone, which could raise potential surgical candidacy in the mind of a neurologist. This would naturally lead to a second dimension—or axis—with investigation with magnetic resonance imaging and electroencephalography (EEG). Furthermore, a dynamic perspective of seizure evolution is clearly important when trying to differentiate epileptic
CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None of the authors has any conflict of interest to disclose. We confirm that we have read the Journal's position on issues involved in ethical publication and affirm that this report is consistent with those guidelines.

ORCID

André Palmint  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4163-6924
Selim Benbadis  https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0214-5492
Milan Brázdil  https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7979-2343
John S. Duncan  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1373-0681
Hajo Hamer  https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1709-8617
Giri Kalamangalam  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0178-4332
Nuria Lacuey  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6067-7414
Patrick Landazuri  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5652-1839
Hans Luders  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8123-9931
Jun Park  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9325-0038
Felix Rosenow  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3989-7471
Susanne Schubert-Bast  https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1545-7364
Adam Strzelecky  https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6288-9915
C. Ákos Szabó  https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6731-3245
Nitin Tandon  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2752-2365
Kiyohito Terada  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9110-6403
Matthew Walker  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0812-0352

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