

PROBLEMS OF THE EPILEPTIC

by

Richard Whitney

English II, Period 5

April 3, 1967

## PROBLEMS OF THE EPILEPTIC

"Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a dumb spirit; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid....."<sup>1</sup>  
This quotation from the Bible describes epilepsy, one of the oldest known disorders. Even earlier, in the fifth century B.C., Hippocrates had this to say: "This disease.....in my opinion.....has a natural cause, and its supposed divine origin is due to (mens) inexperience, and to their wonder at its peculiar character."<sup>2</sup>

Epilepsy is "an excessive discharge of nervous energy from the brain" and is symptomized by violent seizures, dizziness, and sometimes nausea. During a seizure normal brain function stops and abnormal symptoms occur.<sup>3</sup> There are many kinds of epileptic seizures, some of the more important of which are:

1. Grand mal -- During this attack loss of consciousness occurs. It is frequently preceded by a warning aura, which consists of various indescribable sensations such as dizziness, or discomfort in the abdomen.<sup>4</sup> If standing, the victim will fall

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<sup>1</sup>Mark, The New Testament, Revised Standard Version (New York, 1946), p.94.

<sup>2</sup>John R. Green and Harry F. Sleetman, Epileptic Seizures (Baltimore, 1956), Preface.

<sup>3</sup>Shirley Motter Linde, "What Most People Don't Know About Epilepsy", Today's Health (July 1964), p.38.

<sup>4</sup>"Epilepsy", Van Nostrand's Scientific Encyclopedia (New York, 1958), pp.604-605.

to the ground and lose consciousness. His muscles become rigid, and breathing momentarily ceases. Because of this cessation of breathing, his face turns a brilliant red followed by a bluish coloring.<sup>5</sup> His eyes roll upward<sup>6</sup> and the veins in his neck and face engorge. His blood pressure rises, and perspiration and saliva flow. Soon, breathing begins again and saliva is blown from his mouth. Violent, intermittent muscular spasms occur for a few minutes.<sup>7</sup> During this period the victim may bite his tongue or cheek. Finally, the convulsion is followed by a deep sleep, lasting from minutes to several hours. Upon awakening, the victim may be confused, and have difficulty remembering where he is or what has happened.<sup>8</sup> He may feel sick to his stomach and vomit, have a headache, or seem depressed. As time passes his mind becomes more clear, and his memory returns. Within a few minutes after wakening he will remember everything up to the time he lost consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Charlotte A. Bassett, "Epilepsy", Colliers Encyclopedia (1966), IX, 286.

<sup>6</sup>"Epilepsy", Blakiston's New Gould Medical Dictionary (Philadelphia, 1949), pp.346-347.

<sup>7</sup>Van Nostrand's Scientific Encyclopedia, p.605.

<sup>8</sup>Bassett, IX, p.268.

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2. Petit mal -- This form of epilepsy, which occurs more frequently than grand mal, is most often found in women and children. It can happen as many as two hundred times per day, but each attack will last for only a few seconds.<sup>10</sup> The attack begins without an aura, and the victim does not fall to the ground. He partially loses consciousness, and is unaware of his surroundings. There is often a jerking or twitching of arms and legs. A petit mal attack ends as abruptly as it begins, and once it is over the victim has no notion of ever being unconscious.
3. Psychomotor -- This is the most difficult form of epilepsy to diagnose. The victim loses contact with his environment, but he remains active. His behavior is often not consistent with his surroundings. He may act in a trance like manner, or may have a temper tantrum. Psychomotor epilepsy is similar to petit mal, but it lasts longer.<sup>11</sup> One third of the victims are adult.<sup>12</sup>
4. Jacksonian -- This form of epilepsy occurs when an excessive amount of nervous energy is discharged from a certain part of the brain (as opposed to

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<sup>10</sup>Blakiston's New Gould Medical Dictionary, pp.346-347.

<sup>11</sup>Van Nostrand's Scientific Encyclopedia, p.605

<sup>12</sup>Herbert Yahraes, Now - A Brighter Future for the Epileptic (New York, 1958), p.11.

other forms where the discharge is not localized). It is usually the result of a brain tumor or injury. Beginning at an isolated part of the body, it usually spreads. For example, the victim's hand might become numb or shake, and advance up the arm and throughout the body. If this occurs, a grand mal attack will follow. This spreading throughout the body is sometimes prevented by squeezing the affected member.<sup>13</sup>

Normally, brain cells fire off electrical impulses in rhythmic and wavelike patterns. During an epileptic attack the brain cells undergo a rapid increase in firing and the symptoms occur. Electrical impulses from the brain can be recorded with an electroencephalograph (EEG), and these recordings frequently show abnormalities in persons subject to epileptic seizures. However, the fact that a person has an abnormal EEG pattern does not necessarily mean he is an epileptic.<sup>14</sup>

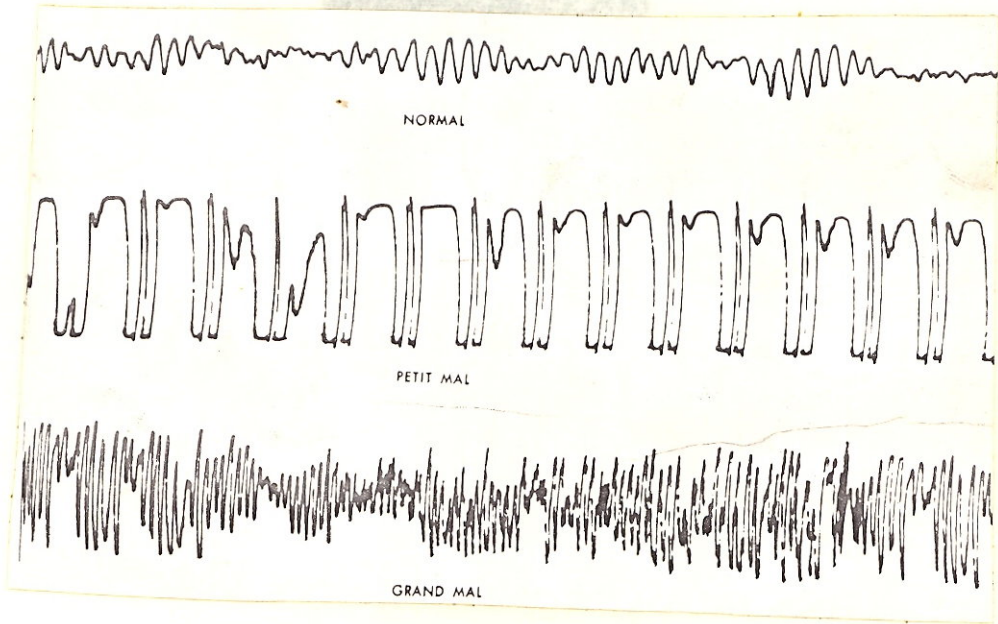
A typical grand mal EEG recording could be described as sharp spikey waves. A petit mal recording is characterized by a sharp spike followed by a dome-topped wave. Examples are shown on the following page.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Bassett, IX, p.286.

<sup>14</sup>Harry Sands and Jacqueline Seaver, Epilepsy - Today's Encouraging Outlook (New York, 1966), p.6.

<sup>15</sup>Bassett, IX, p.269.



Most epileptic attacks are idiopathic -- that is, there is no known underlying cause. This is so in 75% of the cases. The remaining 25% are symptomatic, which means that there is a known organic cause such as a brain infection, a brain tumor, or faulty development of the brain before birth.<sup>16</sup> Attacks can also be caused by stimulæ such as an injury, electrical shock, or a stimulating drug.<sup>17</sup>

While there is no known cure for epilepsy, there is much that can be done to minimize the frequency of attacks, and to make them less severe when they do occur. There are many things a patient can do to help himself. Adequate rest and a well-balanced diet are important. It is best he lead

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<sup>16</sup>Van Nostrand's Scientific Encyclopedia, p.604.

<sup>17</sup>Bassett, IX, pp.267-268.

an active life, since it has been proven that inactivity often contributes toward bringing on an attack. Most important, he must take his medicine regularly, and never abruptly discontinue medication for this would almost certainly bring on an attack.<sup>18</sup>

In recent times medical science has developed many drugs which control seizures. Since each patient is different, combinations of many different drugs may have to be used to achieve adequate control. Phenobarbitol, which was discovered in 1900, is the most commonly used drug. One of its advantages is that it has few side effects. Drowsiness is about the only complaint when using this drug.

Dilantin, which was developed 25 years ago specifically for the control of seizures, is particularly effective in controlling grand mal attacks and is widely used. While gum trouble may develop in some patients, its side effects are generally not serious.<sup>19</sup> Many other drugs have been developed since dilantin, and there are now over eighteen different drugs for the physician to choose from. In spite of this progress, it is sad to note that only 20% of all epileptics are receiving adequate treatment.<sup>20</sup> Some of those whose seizures are not

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<sup>18</sup>Yahraes, p.15.

<sup>19</sup>Bassett, IX, p.269.

<sup>20</sup>Linde, p.40.

under control may turn to advertisements which are sometimes found in newspapers and magazines claiming cure. Dealing with such people is dangerous and expensive. <sup>21</sup>

Once the seizures are under control, an epileptic may lead a nearly normal life. In my opinion the attitude of family and friends plays a vital role in allowing this to happen. The epileptic patient should be encouraged to take part in sports and social functions, and should not be over-protected. There are, of course certain precautions which should be followed by anyone subject to seizures. He should never go swimming alone, and should avoid climbing ladders where he might have a dangerous fall.

Over the years epilepsy has been pinned with a bad name. Only two centuries ago noted doctors believed that it was the work of witches. <sup>22</sup> Even today society would like to forget that epilepsy exists, but this cannot be done since approximately two million people in the United States alone are afflicted with the disease. More people have epilepsy than have cancer and active tuberculosis combined. <sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Yahraes, p.16.

<sup>22</sup>Yahraes, pp.3-4.

<sup>23</sup>The Epilepsy Society of Massachusetts, Epilepsy - Facts and Figures.



It has been said that epilepsy is the only disease where the attitude of society is more damaging to the patient than the disease itself. Nowhere can this better be seen than by reviewing some of the state laws presently in effect.

### 1. Virginia

The marriage of institutionalized or adjudged epileptics is prohibited and a marriage entered into by such persons is void without any decree or divorce or annulment if the marriage was performed in the state or outside the state for the purpose of evading the state law. Anyone marrying such a person with knowledge of the condition is guilty of misdemeanor, punishable by six months imprisonment and/or a fine not exceeding \$500. (1960 code, section 20-47, rev. 1964)<sup>24</sup>

It goes on to say that anyone who helps the couple, in any way, to get married is subject to a punishment of imprisonment for ninety days and/or a fine of no more than \$100. Virginia law also prohibits the marriage of any woman with "hereditary" epilepsy unless she is over 45 years old. Any man with "hereditary" epilepsy is restricted to marrying a woman at least 45 years old.

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<sup>24</sup>The Epilepsy Foundation, The Legal Rights of Persons with Epilepsy (Washington D.C., 1965), p.47.

<sup>25</sup>The Legal Rights of Persons with Epilepsy, p.iii.

## 2. North Carolina

A marriage license will not be issued to persons adjudged by a court as being subject to epileptic attacks, unless they have been sterilized. Persons violating the provision are subject to a fine and/or imprisonment. Such prohibited marriages may be declared void from their beginning upon application of either party to the court. (1961 General Statutes, 51-9, 12, 13, and 50-4.)<sup>26</sup>

## 3. Mississippi

The statute provides that (drivers) licenses shall not be issued to persons with physical or mental disabilities which would prevent them from being safe drivers. (1960 code, title 30, section 8093.) This statutory provision is interpreted by the administrator as prohibiting the licensing of persons with epilepsy. (Letter, Dept. of Public Safety, Sept. 27, 1960.)

The statute permits sterilization of institutionalized epileptics. (1960 code, title 25, section 6957.)<sup>27</sup>

## 4. West Virginia

A marriage is void from the time it is so declared by a decree of nullity where one of the parties is an epileptic, (1960 code, section 4701-1.)<sup>28</sup>

While only three states now have anti-marriage laws dealing with epilepsy, many other states had such laws which have only recently been taken from the books. New Hampshire, for example, prohibited the marriage of epileptics until 1957.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The Legal Rights of Persons with Epilepsy, p.34.

<sup>27</sup> The Legal Rights of Persons with Epilepsy, p.25.

<sup>28</sup> The Legal Rights of Persons with Epilepsy, p.49.

<sup>29</sup> The Legal Rights of Persons with Epilepsy, p.30.

The fact is that epilepsy is not an inherited disease, though some families may have a tendency toward it just as some families have a tendency toward heart trouble.<sup>30</sup> When an epileptic marries and has a child, the chances are only one in forty that the child will have the disorder. And what if he does? If we had prevented the birth of people with epilepsy, the world would have gone without such famous men as Socrates, Julius Caesar, Mohammed, Lord Byron, Alfred the Great, Vincent Van Gogh, Berlioz, Paganini, and Guy De Maupassant.<sup>31</sup>

Most states allow epileptics to drive if they have a certificate from a doctor which states that they have been seizure free for a set period of time. This is true of Massachusetts, where the set time is eighteen months.<sup>32</sup> Studies have shown that epileptics so licensed seldom are the cause of accidents.

What should be done if you are with a person who has an epileptic attack? First, and perhaps most important, you should remain calm. The victim is not in any real danger. Clear the surrounding area so that he will not

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<sup>30</sup>Sands and Seaver, pp. 6-7.

<sup>31</sup>Howard S. Barrows and Eli S. Goldensohn, Handbook for Patients (New York), pp.3-4.

<sup>32</sup>The Legal Rights of Persons with Epilepsy, p.22.

injure himself. Loosen his clothing, and allow the convulsion to run its course. Do not try to restrain the victim from moving. Allow him to regain consciousness naturally. When the seizure is over, move him to a bed and allow him to rest. It is particularly important to be calm when the victim wakes so that he will not be aware of undue tension.<sup>33</sup>

About three years ago I had a convulsion, and it was diagnosed as grand mal epilepsy. It has now been just a year since my last attack, and I am hopeful that the medication I am taking has it under control. While I face many problems because of this disorder, I am encouraged by the progress being made in medical research, and by the attitude of my family and friends.

*It's a pleasure to read a paper that has genuine meaning to the researcher — as yours seems to have for you.*

*A*

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<sup>33</sup>Yahraes, pp.16-17.

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