

## **WANTED: EPILEPSY ROLE MODEL**

**By Blanche S. Rivera**  
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WANTED: government official or showbiz personality to serve as model for epilepsy.

The volunteer must have the illness without being ashamed of it, must be successful and knowledgeable about the disease and must be willing to come out in public.

The Philippine League Against Epilepsy (PLAE) announced Tuesday that it was looking for an epileptic celebrity, who can boost its education campaign to remove the social stigma associated with the ailment.

Citing singer Gary Valenciano, a diabetic whose disclosure of his illness helped the public to understand diabetes, the PLAE said a popular figure from government or show business would help the group's campaign to promote a normal life for epileptics.

"You see, this has a snowball effect. If someone comes out, then others will also follow," PLAE president Leonor Cabral-Lim said.

The ailment affects one to 3 percent of Filipinos. All over the world some 500 million people suffer the social consequences of epilepsy, with 5 million new cases emerging every year in developing countries.

Lim, who teaches at the University of the Philippines-Manila, said most epileptics suffer from self-esteem problems because of the "social penalties" of the ailment, which include discrimination in employment, education, legislation and marriage.

Lim said even the educated public tended to associate epilepsy with mental disorder.

She said the Philippines was the first country in the Western Pacific to launch a campaign on epilepsy, dubbed "Epilepsy: Out of the Shadows," in cooperation with the World Health Organization, International League Against Epilepsy and International Bureau for Epilepsy.

The campaign was officially launched in the country in September last year to improve the acceptability of epilepsy as a treatable disease and to encourage the government to address the concerns of epileptics.

A survey by the Philippine Neurological Association in 1999 showed that 32 percent of patients and caregivers, and 11 percent of health workers in the country had not read or heard about epilepsy.

The survey also found that 17 percent of health workers and 4 percent of patients had the mistaken belief that marrying, caring for or living with epileptics could transmit epilepsy. They also believed that they could get the disease by witnessing an attack.

"If we can accept hypertension, diabetes and asthma, then we should also be able to accept epilepsy as a condition," Lim said.

"There is nothing to be ashamed about because it's just like other diseases. The people just lack education," she said.

PLAE is enlisting the support of the Department of Health in its advocacy campaign, including the drafting of a National Epilepsy Act that seeks to remove discrimination against epileptics even in activities like driving.

PLAE members will meet with DOH officials this week.