

SHOULD WE ALLOW PEOPLE WITH EPILEPSY TO DRIVE?

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Philippine Daily Inquirer
September 12, 2001

Driving with Disabilities

MOTORCYCLIST Benjamin, 40, a businessman, has already met three accidents. Benjamin suffers from epilepsy, and sometimes he forgets to take his medications on time.

When the disease attacks while he's on the bike, it's always too late.

Jeepney driver Ferdie, 25, is the eldest sibling in a large family and the sole breadwinner. Although he regularly takes his medications, he still experiences epilepsy seizures every day.

But Ferdie says he doesn't worry about his affliction stopping him from becoming a productive citizen and doing the only job he knows doing best: driving.

He adds that before he undergoes a seizure, there is always a warning sign: his stomach would ache.

Junior was 21 when he was asked by his family to stop driving because of his frequent seizures. He first learned to drive when he was 18, and just got a driver's license recently. To this day, his father would accompany him if he wants to drive.

Driving is stressful, but a means of livelihood for some. It entails alertness and concentration. Private motorists need to concentrate on their driving. Drivers of public utility vehicles, however, have to mind the road and their passengers at the same time.

How can epilepsy, then, fit into such a demanding job? Should the public allow people with epilepsy to drive at all?

Perhaps, the first question we should ask is, who tells who first? Should the government take the first step and exercise more restrictive screening processes for driver's license applicants, or should the public or families report members who have epilepsy?

Epilepsy is caused by abnormal electrical discharges from the brain cells. It's a disorder that causes recurrent seizures in varying intensities. It is not contagious, but anyone can have epilepsy at any stage of life.

The causes range from brain infections, tumors, strokes, trauma, developmental and degenerative conditions and genetic abnormalities.

Over 230 Filipinos per 100,000 population suffer from epilepsy. Of this number, 180 are children. Almost all of these youngsters will be compelled, or required, to drive.

Neurologist Josephine Casanova Gutierrez of the Philippine League Against Epilepsy said, during the First National Epilepsy Congress on Sept. 8, that the PLEA discourages blanket prohibitions and laws that dismiss all persons with epilepsy as dangerous on the road. Gutierrez added that not all seizures while driving result in accidents.

In deciding if a person with epilepsy should be allowed to drive, said Gutierrez, one has to balance many considerations. There have been many misconceptions about the disease, and objective studies should be considered, she said.

"It is easy to totally ban all people with epilepsy to drive, but the question is this: Is that a fair way to decide for patients with epilepsy? What do the figures say? Are they a danger to the public? Are they a danger to themselves?"

Low Risk

Gutierrez's pointed out figures in a study that indicate only 0.25 percent of all road accidents are seizure-related.

A study showed that the annual risk of accident for a driver with epilepsy is only 0.25 percent as compared to the average driver, which is 10 percent.

Gutierrez also showed the average driver would have an accident as a result of collision with someone with a seizure once in 4,000 years. She said that the accident risk for people with epilepsy is about 1.3 to 1.8 times that of normal drivers. She also added that other persons with comparable risks are allowed to drive.

Gutierrez also cited the study of Normal LG, Medical Aspects of Road Safety. It showed an 11-year study of 20,000 bus drivers that resulted in only 8 accidents due to seizures.

Gutierrez, however, pointed out there are reasons for the seizure related accidents. First, only few people with epilepsy drive, and they do not drive as much as the average driver.

The numbers may be low, but the accidents are more severe. She stressed, however, that not all seizures at the wheel result in an accident because only 50 percent of seizures at the wheel result in an accident and people with epilepsy are more careful drivers.

However, she considered people with frequent seizures should not drive.

-- The study says that more males meet an accident than females. Male drivers are 15 percent more accident prone than female drivers.

-- The summer months of the year are when most accidents occur. The probability is higher during Friday and Saturday.

-- Drivers aged 15 to 24, and above 65 years old are more likely to be involved in accidents.

Certain medical conditions even pose higher risks for drivers, she pointed out from other studies. Though 38 percent of motoring accidents involving diseases are attributed to seizures, 17 percent are traced to cardiovascular diseases, 23 percent to blackouts, 17 percent to insulin overdose, and 8 percent to strokes and other sicknesses.

"The risk of an alcoholic getting involved in an accident is 30 times more than for a normal person. Yet in the United States, the alcoholic's license is only temporarily confiscated."

Gutierrez said that seizures from epilepsy have varying intensities and duration. There are mild seizures, such as tingling and numbness on one side of the face and hands, but without loss of awareness.

A certain 45-year-old man has been undergoing about 10 generalized tonic clonic seizures over the past 20 years, every episode during sleep.

Others' seizures only involve the hardening of a hand in a short time. Some people experience complex partial seizures, with warning symptoms before an attack. Such attacks are always preceded for 30 seconds by distinctive stomach discomfort.

Impending Attack

Motorists with epilepsy are thus warned of an impending attack, and thus are given enough time to park their cars on the side.

In countries like Japan, Greece, Portugal and Brazil, people with epilepsy are totally banned from driving. But their governments have found out that a total ban hasn't prevented seizure-related accidents from happening.

Why? Gutierrez analyzes there are drivers who have had their seizures for the first time. And there are people who lie to licensing authorities or falsify their medical records to acquire drivers' licenses.

It seems the stricter you are the more the public's tendency to hide epilepsy within their ranks.

Section 22 of Republic Act 4136, as amended by Batasang Pambansa Bilang 398 states that "every person who desires to operate any motor vehicle shall personally file an application to the director or deputies for a license to drive motor vehicles, provided, however, that he or she does not suffer from diseases such as tuberculosis, sexually transmitted disease, epilepsy or who is an alcohol or drug dependent."

Land Transportation Office traffic education chief Daisy Jacobo said that the real danger lies with persons with epilepsy who do not know when the next attack would come.

"What is the line that would divide or distinguish the general welfare from the right of the person with epilepsy? Can we treat the law in a case-to-case basis? " asked Jacobo. "What I see is that the law rules out all the risks for the protection of the general welfare. We don't have a law on a case-to-case basis."