

LIVING WITH EPILEPSY

**By Tessa R. Salazar
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EPILEPSY is caused by an abnormal electrical discharge from the brain.

It's a chronic brain disorder that causes recurrent seizures in varying intensities. Anybody can have epilepsy - from the newborn to the elderly.

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

The good news is given proper treatment, 70 to 80 percent of the people with epilepsy can lead normal lives.

Starting with monotherapy, the patient is administered a particular drug of choice until the maximum dose is reached. About 60-80 percent of patients would respond to one drug, another 20 percent would need two drugs. About 10-12 percent would be considered "difficult to treat."

In the Philippines, most patients would choose phenobarbital, the cheapest drug that costs 1.75 pesos each. On a dosage of two to three tablets per day, each adult would have to spent 3,000 pesos per year.

The drug however is subject to abuse as it is barbiturate. A doctor needs a special permit called an S2 before he or she could prescribe phenobarbital.

Phenobarbital has many side effects. It could cause hyperactivity in children and cognitive effects, but Dr. Leonor Cabral-Lim of the Philippine League Against Epilepsy said this would be better than having repeated seizures that are traumatizing and dangerous for the patient.

Other drugs that are also used are phenitoin, carbamazetine and valproic acid. Phenytoin costs 18 pesos per capsule and requires two to three dosages a day. Carbamazetine costs 12 pesos per tablet with the same dosage.

There is also oxcarbazepine that has reduced its price from 28 pesos to 18 pesos.

"You are talking of a treatment that costs 24 pesos to 50 pesos a day versus a 5-peso treatment with (phenobarbital)," Cabral-Lim said.

There are new generation drugs that promise fewer side effects, but are more expensive. The ones available in the Philippines are gabapentin, lamotrigine and topiramate. These drugs cost about 50 pesos.

"They are all effective, but the issue in choosing drugs would be the ease of use, the availability, the side effects and the cost," said Cabral-Lim. "Even if you end up treating patients with phenobarbital, it is still cost effective. They can work, they can be productive citizens."

Cabral-Lim said she still gets visits from former patients. They used to be children afraid of the treatment and were misunderstood by society. But now they are leading normal lives. Many of them have stable jobs and have families of their own.