Drug therapy for child epileptics questioned

Hopkins study reveals new findings

By Sue Williams
AFRO Staff Writer

A recently concluded study by scientists at Johns Hopkins University says that children afflicted with epilepsy may not have to take anticonvulsive drugs for the duration of their lives.

The results, if heeded by general practitioners, pediatricians and family practitioners, could help save hundreds of dollars for families who have children who are taking anti - convulsive drugs, including dilantin and phenobarbitol, for the treatment of epilepsy.

According to the results of the study, children who have been free of seizures for a period of four years or more may be weaned from the drugs over a period of time, with little chance of epileptic seizures recurring.

The researchers said at a press briefing this week that children who fall into this category have a 70 percent chance of remaining seizure free for the rest of their lives.

Dr. Kenton Holden, one of the researchers of the study, said that a larger part of the reason behind the study was to alert family doctors who treat epileptics that drug therapy may be eliminated in some cases with virtually no worries of repercussion.

"What we're trying to do," Holden said, "is reach a group (of doctors) that treats the majority of epileptics."

Holden and Dr. John Freeman, who also worked on the study, said many doctors today prescribe and maintain drug therapy for their child and adolescent epileptic patients because they are unaware that they can treat the disease any other way.

In addition, they said, many doctors are restrained by worried parents who do not want to see their children suffer grand mal or other types of seizures common to epilepsy.

"A lot of parents don't want their kids off medication," Holden said.

"They're too scared. It's much easier (for physicians) to keep writing refills than to deal with all the factors in treatment of epilepsy."

"You're treating a lot of different things," he said.

Figures available show that the average family of an epileptic child spends about $250 a year on drugs alone, plus an additional $100 for visits to the doctor's office.

The drugs used, while costing the families excess money, have been shown to cause drowsiness, loss of alertness and mental acumen and some allergic reactions.

Studies have also shown the drugs to cause birth defects in the babies of pregnant women who use them, Holden said.

It is common practice, Freeman said, for doctors to increase the dosage of anti-convulsive medicine as a child grows.

"That means that we're using drugs to suppress seizures," he said.

But if drug dosages were allowed to stay the same and seizures reduced over time, as is quite likely, he said, a gradual weaning could be affected and drugs eventually eliminated altogether.

Freeman said that what the doctors involved in the study are doing is posing a dilemma to the physician. With the results of the study having been made public, he said that he hoped doctors would think about reducing dosages over time instead of automatically increasing them.

The use of drugs, said Dr. Holden, has succeeded in creating psychological cripples, both on the parts of the parents and the children.

They have been afraid not to take the medicines prescribed because of what they thought was a need to take the drugs to ward off seizures.

But the recent study indicates that if the child has not had severe seizures from an early age, and does not show an abnormal EEG, his chances for complete recovery after some drug therapy are great.

The doctors said that the results were especially encouraging in light of the fact that the Johns Hopkins Epileptic Center, which sees the most severe cases of epilepsy, has had such good results, doctors throughout the country, who for the most part see far less serious cases, can expect good results in drug-weaning.

The doctors said that out of the 88 people used in the study, 80 percent had been seizure-free for four years or more, and 70 percent of that 80 percent responded well to the drug-weaning process and have not had recurrence despite the elimination of medication. The study was conducted by a total of seven researchers, all of whom are connected with the Johns Hopkins Epileptic Center.

The results were printed in the New England Journal of Medicine.

New school opens

A new school for adolescents, the Chautauqua Academy, is opening with the cooperation of the Brown Memorial Woodbrook Presbyterian Church.

The purpose of the high school is to provide a private school for adolescents who are not achieving as well as they should in reading, writing, and mathmatics.

In order to help these students achieve at a level commensurate with their intelligence, classes will be kept small, averaging four students, and every student will receive one to one tutoring.

The Chautauqua Academy will be located in the Brown Memorial Woodbrook Presbyterian Church at 6200 N. Charles St. School personnel include John B. Bath, Ph.D., Dwight E. Know, Ed.D., and Clifford Kolson, Ed.D.

For more information, write the Chautauqua Academy, 6200 N. Charles St., Baltimore, Maryland 21212, or call (301) 377- 4289.

Voluntary sterilizations rise, study shows

The number of couples using voluntary sterilization to avoid unwanted pregancies has risen fivefold over the past decade to a current level of about 100 million worldwide, says a recently published Johns Hopkins report.

The increase has made voluntary sterilization the most widespread form of contraception, with more than a third of all couples who use contraception relying on it, says the latest issue of Population Reports, which is published by the Population Information Program at the Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health.

Significant chanced in laws and regulations have accompanied the increasing use of voluntary sterilization, says the publication, which focuses on legal issues associated with this form of birth control.

It notes that at least 21 countries have eased restrictions in the past decade, while only four have tightened them.

Thus, while sterilization was once widely regarded as an act of mutilation subject to crminial punishment, it is now generally regarded in many countries as a normal part of medical practice and often as an individual right, the publication states.

Among countries that have taken major steps to ease restrictions are Austria, Denmark, Italy, New Zealand, the Philippines, Taiwan, Iraq, Tunisia, Columbia, El Salvador and Mexico, says the publication, while Iran, Saudi Arabia, Chile and Peru have added new restrictions.

The leading country by far, in the number of voluntary sterilizations performed is the People's Republic of China, where an estimated 40 million couples now rely on this method. India is second, with an estimated 25 million couples.

In many other countries, however, the use of voluntary sterilization has also expanded dramatically. The U.S., for example, has seen the number of couples relying on it grow from 1 million to roughly 13 million over the past decade. In Latin America, usage has grown from 1 million couples in 1970 to about 4.5 million at present.

The increasing popularity of voluntary sterilization in many countries results mainly from word-of-mouth publicity, says Phyllis T. Piotrow, director of the Population Program and one of the authors of the report.

"There are a few countries—China, India and Singapore—where governments emphasize this form of birth control," she says. "In many others, though, there has been little government involvement and vitrually no publicity."

Women—who now far outnumber men in seeking voluntary sterilation — are promoting its use among themselves, says Dr. Piotrow.

"A recent major survey suggested that safety and effectiveness are the two keys to deciding whether a given form of contraception will gain broad acceptance," she says. "The fact that voluntary sterilization has a success rate of about 99 percent, few side effects in connection with surgery and virtually none afterward probably accounts for muchof its popularity.

"For couples who want no more children, voluntary sterilization is a one - time, relatively trouble-free method," says Dr. Piotrow. In addition, the training of more doctors in advanced sterilization techniques has made female sterilization more convenient and more widely available than was true in the past, she notes.

Jan Stepan, J.U. Dr., assistant librarian for foreign and international law at Harvard Law School and principal author of the current issue of Population Reports, says it is difficult to know how much the spread of voluntary sterilization reflects changes in laws and regulations, as opposed to how much the legal changes reflect ublic and medical acceptance of this form of birth control.

In any case, he says, "it is very clear that the overall trend is toward the recognition of fully legal status for voluntary sterilation."

He also notes that in some countries, medical practice and the growing desire of couples to take advantage of voluntary sterilization because of its safety and effectiveness have outrun changes in the laws.

Thus, says Dr. Stepan, in the case of France, where the legality of voluntary sterilization may be in question, "thousands of voluntary sterilizations are performed without any official intervention."

The Harvard official, an expert on legal matters associated with population, says that some Moslem countries remain opposed to voluntary sterilization because of provisions in Islamic law that have been interpreted as prohibiting actions leading to permanent loss of fertility.

As techniques for reversing sterilizaiton improve, he says, this opposition can be expected to diminish. According to the Hopkins report, current success rates for reversing male sterilization range from 40 to 70 percent. Reversal rates of as high as 60 percent have been achieved for women, although the average rate is assumed to be significantly lower than that.

The publication notes that for all programs supported by the U.S. government, informed consent is necessary. Candidates for voluntary sterilization must sign a form indicating that they understand the permanent nature of the procedure, know that it involves some risk, and that alternatives are available.

Population Reports is published six times a year and is widely distributed, mostly to government officials, health planners and physicians in developing countries.

The publication is printed in five languages.

Jan Matzeliger, a Black man from Dutch Guiana, invented a shoe-fasting machine in 1883 that revolutionized the shoe industry.