The Search for Hidden Epileptics

Victims can be helped, but they can't always be found—for epilepsy may disguise itself as everything from a headache to appendicitis

By THEODORE BERLAND

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KEITH WAS 10. He was a normal and healthy boy—except that he couldn't read.

A school psychologist had rated his IQ at 39, but his parents were sure he was not that retarded. On the advice of their family doctor, they took him to a laboratory where his brain waves could be recorded.

It was a painless and harmless procedure; in fact, Keith found it rather pleasant. All he had to do was nap in the lab with thin wires taped to his head. These wires carried faint electrical signals from his brain to a machine which translated them into wavy lines on a strip of paper. By checking the wavy lines, doctors were able to determine that Keith—who had never had a "fit" in his life—was a hidden epileptic.

His epilepsy, the doctors explained, was a mild form that affected his vision. In time, he might show other symptoms, but he would most likely outgrow his affliction.

Today, with the help of drugs and books printed in large type, he has progressed to the point where he can read third-grade stories.

Keith's parents were amazed that his problems in school stemmed from a quiet form of epilepsy. Like most people, they associated epilepsy with the wild seizure—falling to the ground, thrashing arms, foaming at the mouth. Actually, this is but one of the many forms which epilepsy takes. Many victims experience such mild attacks that they are unaware of them.

"A large percentage of patients with such disorders are not clinically diagnosed as epileptics," say two of the nation's leading epilepsy authorities, Dr. Frederick W. Stamps and Dr. Frederic A. Gibbs of the University of Illinois. "They carry such diagnostic labels as 'organic neurosis,' 'gastric migraine,' 'peptic ulcer,' 'appendicitis,' 'headache,' and 'behavioral disorder.' "

To understand why epilepsy comes in so many disguises, you must recognize it for what it is: a symptom of tiny disorders in the brain.

Dr. Stamps explains that the brain changes certain chemicals into electrical signals. Normally this electricity builds up and then drops off in a set rhythm of 10 oscillations per second. But when certain brain cells are injured or impaired, they send out wild electrical discharges. These tiny "lightning flashes" in the brain shoot through nerves and either cause false sensations or whip muscles into violent action.

There is nothing mysterious about what causes these cells to "go bad." The causes are the same as those which provoke serious disturbances in other organs of the body: accidents, infection, tumors, abscesses, and toxins.

EPILEPSY can be started in children by such infections as measles, mumps, flu, and encephalitis, Dr. Stamps explains. It can occur at any age from blows to the head (the reason he forbids his children to box or play football). In older persons it can come with hardening of the arteries or from small strokes.

Epilepsy can quietly hit anyone. It is estimated that about 1 percent of the population—almost 2,000,000 Americans—have epilepsy. But this statistic is not so alarming when it is coupled with another one: that is, 80 out of 100 epileptics can lead essentially normal lives, thanks to drugs which put up a chemical wall around damaged brain cells and prevent their "lightning" from spreading.

What's more, research is making large strides. Treatment has advanced further in the last 25 years than during the preceding 25 centuries, and one day there even may be a cure.

BUT TODAY'S medicines, effective as they are, are wasted unless they are used. The sooner an epileptic is treated, the sooner he will lead a normal life again. This is why parents should learn the danger signals of "hidden epilepsy."

If you have a baby, be suspicious if he shivers for short periods, especially upon awakening. In all children, watch for:

- —Lapses of consciousness, even as brief as breaking off in the middle of a sentence for 10 seconds while talking.
- —Complaints of unexplained stomach aches, headaches, or pains in any part of the body.
- —A change of gait.
- —Restlessness without reason.
- —Attacks of vomiting.
- —A high IQ but poor grades in school.
- —Mirror writing for as long as a few months or more (most children mirror write at first, but only for brief periods of time).

If your child shows any of these signs, consult your family doctor or pediatrician. With his skills and the modern tools at his command, he will be able to tell whether or not your child is a hidden epileptic.

COVER:

This sunsuit-clad miss has the time of her life as Dad (out of camera range) creates special rain effects with the garden hose. Scene photographed by Dennis Hallinan.

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