

Epilepsy myths rigid

By Felix Sanchez

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(Second of two parts)

"I would like to be treated normally. Of course, that's the way I really am."

There are more than 16,000 epileptics in the Fort Worth and Arlington area.

"Bill Jones," a student here, is one of them.

Bill prefers not to use his real name because he thinks it would not add significance to what he has to say.

What he does say is that epileptics are not unlike any other "normal" person.

But does society look upon Bill and other epileptics as normal?

Bill doesn't think so.

"A person who is real active, looks normal and then has a seizure scares people. They don't like those people that act weird. But there is no trouble at all here (UTA)."

Bill says that when he does tell people he is epileptic — if he tells at all — they have a peculiar reaction.

"If I tell anybody they laugh and — Bill takes on a deep radio voice, probably because of his radio-television major status — "they say 'hey, you're just kidding me.'"

"But then it sets in on 'em.

"I guess it is kind of hard to take. I mean, here's a friend and it (epilepsy) has hit him. To them epilepsy (and disease in general) is so far away."

Bill says small town reactions, like in his hometown Nocona, are different than big city reactions.

"When you live in a small town, everyone knows everything, so they knew I had epilepsy. At first they (the townspeople) didn't know what to do when I had a seizure. They would get excited and want to send me home to my father or the hospital.

"But after awhile they all just let me lie there for awhile and say, 'oh, he'll be all right in a minute.' And of course I was."

But Bill says whenever he has a seizure in the city, the general reaction is one of fright and not knowing what to do.

"I have had seizures all over this campus. Students think I am ready to die and are wanting to take me to the hospital.

"But then I would come around and I was all right and fine."

Bill described the time he was released from the hospital after he was declared okay and not really needing all the tests they were begging him to take.

"I know what's wrong with me. But

I haven't really found anybody who knows what it is."

Bill has multiple seizure epilepsy. Not gran mal or petit mal, which are other forms of epilepsy.

Bill says he has encountered social stigma and the reluctance of employers to hire him.

"Lots of employers (in Nocona) didn't know whether they should hire me or not. They probably didn't think

The Fort Worth Tarrant County Epilepsy Association makes the following recommendations for persons who encounter a person having a major epileptic seizure:

—Help the victim lie down and remove any glasses or false teeth.

—Loosen tight clothing and place a pillow or soft object under the head.

—Move any hard or sharp objects out of the way; stay with the person and observe his activities.

—Do not restrain any movements he may make and try not to force anything into his mouth.

—After the seizure turn the person on his side and allow any saliva to drain.

—Do not give anything to drink to the victim until he is fully awake.

—Emergency help should usually not be called unless the victim does not start breathing after the seizure.

—If the person has seizures continuously or if he injures himself, help should be summoned.

—A seizure cannot be stopped once it has begun.

—Unconsciousness may last as much as 15 minutes during and after a seizure. After awakening, the person may be confused and extremely drowsy.

I could handle the work."

As far as peer pressure, Bill says that "at first they treated me differently but then their attitudes changed and I didn't mind being pampered a little bit.

"I think I could probably take advantage of almost anything or anybody I want. Like a friend. Just tell 'em a sob story.

"But I don't feel I need any help. I just want to be treated normally.

Epileptics need love, too."

Mary Heitman, a Texas Rehabilitation Commission (TRC) counselor, says her office is trying to inform employes about epileptic advances and stereotyped myths.

"Epileptics have long been neglected because they (employers) are afraid of their seizures, more so than any other disease," she says.

"For instance, take a diabetic who has got a real physical problem if he doesn't take his medicine. There is a real chance of losing the person. Yet no one fears him.

"But take an epileptic who has a gran mal seizure, who convulses and froths at the mouth and everybody thinks he is going to die. Everyone fears him.

"I think it is a fear of what happens. If anyone witnesses what happens he gets the fear I am talking about."

Heitman attributes the new handicapped employment laws as affecting employers who are hasty to hire the handicapped but not epileptics.

"They are just so afraid of the epileptics. But I must say we have made some progress with some of the larger companies.

"Their stand seems to be if a person is qualified he will be hired. But there are still some who are concerned with an epileptic's seizures."

Heitman, the counselor for the Dallas County area, added that "some employers who have epileptics in their family will be considerate and hire epileptics. Some of the discrimination which has plagued epileptics is being slowly made progress on."

Byron Fuller, another TRC counselor, says employers are not well educated or informed about epilepsy.

"Maybe they (employers) are not convinced they (epileptics) can do the work they want them to do," he said.

"Sometimes they are hired and sometimes they are not. We try to match the physical handicap to the job we recommend to them.

"I just don't say to an employer here comes an epileptic. However, I do think it is a handicap."

The Tarrant County Chapter of the National Foundation for Epilepsy expects to raise \$10,000-\$15,000 to help finance its programs to educate area residents.

Executive director Becky Hackler said some of the money will go toward a camp for epileptic children held for the first time last year in Glen Rose.

Hackler said the camp is the only kind in the nation and she hopes to improve on last year's 50-odd attendance.