

Media Release

Employing people with epilepsy

Epileptic seizures can happen anywhere and at any time – even with hotel guests or staff. Having a basic understanding about epilepsy and first aid will increase the likelihood of hotel staff responding appropriately to an unexpected event such as a seizure.

Epilepsy is a common neurological condition involving a tendency to have recurrent seizures. The brain controls the body's actions, sensations and emotions through nerve cells that carry messages between the brain and the body. These messages are transmitted through regular electrical impulses. A seizure occurs when sudden bursts of electrical activity in the brain disrupt this pattern. The kind of seizure, and the parts of the body affected by it, relates to the part of the brain in which the irregular electrical activity occurred.

Seizures can involve a loss of consciousness, a range of unusual movements, odd feelings and sensations or changed behaviour. About 65 percent of people achieve good seizure control with medication and good lifestyle management.

Seizures can sometimes look frightening but rarely cause any damage to the brain. Once the seizure is over, the person gradually returns to normal. It is important that key hotel staff, such as Executive Housekeepers, ensure that anyone having a seizure in the workplace is protected and not further alienated by the experience.

The two commonest types of seizures most likely to occur in a hotel setting are called Tonic-Clonic and Complex Partial seizures. During a Tonic-Clonic seizure a person's body stiffens and air forced past the vocal cords often causes a cry or groan as the person falls to the ground. Their limbs begin to jerk in strong symmetrical, rhythmic movements. The person may dribble from the mouth, go blue or red in the face or lose their bladder and/or bowel control as the body relaxes. As consciousness returns, the person may be confused, drowsy, agitated or depressed. They may have a headache and want to sleep. The drowsiness can last for a number of hours.

Anyone can help someone having a Tonic-Clonic seizure by following a few simple guidelines. These include staying with the person, timing the seizure from the outset, protecting them from injury, placing something soft under their head, rolling the person on to their side at the earliest opportunity to maintain their airway, never placing anything in their mouth and calling an

ambulance if the seizure lasts for five minutes. Check for a medical ID bracelet or necklace and ring the emergency number, if available.

During complex partial seizures a person has impaired awareness, which means they aren't aware of where they are and what they are doing and are at risk of injury until they return to full awareness. The person may often appear confused and dazed and may do strange and repetitive actions like fiddling with clothing or making chewing movements or uttering unusual sounds. During a complex partial seizure it is important that you stay with the person until they regain full awareness. Avoid restraint and if you need to move them away from danger, gently guide them by the elbow. You don't need to put the person in the recovery position on their side because they aren't unconscious. Call an ambulance if the complex partial seizure lasts for 15 minutes. Most of these seizures resolve in a couple of minutes but confusion after the seizure can last for some time.

For many people with epilepsy, it isn't the condition but people's lack of knowledge and understanding that causes the greatest problems. Most people with epilepsy can do most of the things that people without epilepsy can do such as – work, play sport, raise a family, drive and enjoy social activities.

Becoming an airline pilot or joining the police or armed forces aren't vocational options currently available to people with epilepsy. There are, however, many other options available and many people with epilepsy have worked successfully in the hospitality industry. Having epilepsy doesn't automatically mean having more time off work, nor does it make people less reliable. The common cold or flu is likely to account for more sick leave than any time taken off due to seizures.

For those who hire staff, it is probably natural that you are concerned when an applicant tells you he or she has epilepsy. It is vital you find out specific information about that individual's epilepsy circumstances rather than make assumptions that everything you know about epilepsy will be relevant to that person because it may not.

There is significant variation among people living with epilepsy. Many people have complete control of their seizures and their condition won't have any impact in a work environment. Other people might only have nocturnal seizures and be at no risk of day time seizure activity. Others might have simple partial seizures where they maintain complete awareness during the seizure, which eliminates the risk of harm or injury during a seizure in the workplace. If the best person for the job also has epilepsy, they are still the best person for the job.

People often hide their condition because they may have had negative experiences in the past when they have disclosed the fact that they have epilepsy to a prospective employer. To assume that a person's epilepsy will prevent them from doing the job is often a mistake and can lead to

unnecessary discrimination. After all, a job interview is all about a person's ability to do the job.

There is an epilepsy organisation in each state available to assist with all epilepsy related enquiries. The national epilepsy helpline can be called from anywhere in Australia for the cost of a local call on 1300 852 853.

For further media information contact:

Julie Stephens, Stephens Public Relations

Tel: 03 9391 4603 0413 119 673

Jeremy Maxwell, Epilepsy Foundation of Victoria

Tel: 9805 8111

Email: jmaxwell@epilepsy.asn.au

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