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## Art helps lift the veil on epilepsy

It's misunderstood but epilepsy's mysterious link with art is helping experts to shine light on the condition, writes **Julia Medew**.



Megan O'Keefe is one of 94 people taking part in a Melbourne University study examining the influence of epilepsy on artistic expression.

PICTURE: JOE ARMAO

MEGAN O'Keefe doesn't like looking at her self-portrait much.

She took the photograph of herself when she was experiencing symptoms of epilepsy as a teenager, which no one recognised as a medical problem or understood.

"I was 19 and I was not happy . . . A lot of people were saying I was vague. No one ever said it to my face but I read in school reports that I was a daydreamer and not paying attention," she explains.

"I now believe I was having absent seizures, which is basically staring off into space. It's like someone has put you on pause."

The subtle signs of epilepsy made Ms O'Keefe withdraw socially and feel misunderstood. She was doing well at school but people were mak-

ing observations about her behind her back.

By age 27, she was having tonic-clonic seizures — severe seizures, which usually involves someone falling to the ground and convulsing. Over the next five years, these events became more frequent, to the point where she was having up to four or five each week, plus other partial seizures as well.

The seizures were often violent. Ms O'Keefe, under attack from within, would unconsciously fight anyone who tried to pin her down. On one occasion, she grabbed someone's ankle on the ground and would not let go. During a different type of seizure, she once walked from her house and woke from a semi-conscious state in the middle of a four-lane freeway.

Ms O'Keefe underwent various tests to determine the

cause of her seizures, but these were inconclusive. At 35, she was finally diagnosed as having epilepsy — a disorder of brain function that affects about 3 per cent of Australians.

Throughout her journey, Ms O'Keefe has experienced a lot of stigma. People would often ask her what drugs she was using or if she was drunk when seizures came on. One shop owner once told her to get out of their store because she might repel customers.

"Seizures are so misunderstood, I can't believe people still don't know basic seizure first aid. It is still not a standard part of the first-aid courses people do," she says.

As a result of the psychological damage she suffered through these experiences, Ms O'Keefe became a recluse and fearful of going out, especially alone. She changed from the bright, bubbly girl she used to



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**MEGAN O’KEEFE**

be to someone who was anxious and depressed.

Art helped Ms O’Keefe cope with some of these problems and now, with her epilepsy well controlled by medication, she is one of 94 people taking part in a Melbourne University study that is examining the influence of epilepsy on artistic expression.

Researcher Jim Chambliss — a US lawyer who was surprised by a sudden creative streak after being diagnosed with epilepsy in his 30s — has reviewed more than 2000 artworks to see how the condition has an impact on art and how it could help diagnosis.

It has long been known that the production of artwork is a complex neurological process, but Mr Chambliss has discovered commonalities in the artwork produced by people with epilepsy.

A lot of the artists used vibrant tertiary colours, which might show the visual pathway in the brain being hyper-stimulated, he said. There are also a lot of facial and spatial

distortions in the artwork, which potentially reflects the visual illusions some people with epilepsy experience, he said.

Many of the artworks also depicted feelings associated with seizures, such as being pulled into something or falling. Mr Chambliss has also observed changes in people’s artwork after they have been medicated, a clear example of the condition’s impact.

While most people don’t know the part of the brain or focal point that produces their seizures, Mr Chambliss hopes to isolate this for some of his subjects. This would help them understand their condition and the way it has an impact on their behaviour. It may also lead to better treatment.

While everyone seems to experience epilepsy in a different way, Mr Chambliss said the artists participating in the study were excited to be part of something that might help others understand them.

“A lot of these artists want to be better understood. There can be two impacts of

epilepsy, firstly the symptoms and then the public reaction. That is, how it impacts on someone’s job, relationships, ability to travel, and so on. Often these can be more debilitating,” he says, pointing out that having epilepsy will not always make you an artist, and vice versa.

Epilepsy Foundation of Victoria chief executive Graeme Spears, who is helping fund the research, said he hoped it would raise awareness of the condition and help with diagnosis.

“It’s a very difficult condition to diagnose, so anything that can help that process is fantastic . . . It’s also a completely different way of engaging people in discussion about epilepsy,” he said.

Artworks from the study will be exhibited in the Daly Wing of St Vincent’s Hospital from Thursday.

**LINKS**

- ▶ [www.creativesparks-ep.com](http://www.creativesparks-ep.com)
- ▶ [www.epinet.org.au](http://www.epinet.org.au)