

Epilepsy has attracted attention and been a source of controversy throughout the ages. Let's look back at the history of this condition.



1% of the world's population has epilepsy, a condition of spontaneously recurrent seizures. A seizure is a sudden, excessive discharge of nervous system electrical activity that usually causes unexpected changes in behavior, motor function, sensation or consciousness.



Epilepsy is not a new affliction. In fact, the esteemed Greek physician Hippocrates wrote the first book on epilepsy in 400 BC. Hippocrates refuted the idea that epilepsy was a curse or a sign from the gods. In 70 A.D., epilepsy even made a debut in the Bible. In the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus Christ casts a devil from a boy with seizures. Years later, in 1494 two Dominican Friars wrote a handbook which identified seizures as a characteristic of witches. The persecution that followed resulted in over 200,000 deaths (erratum: up to 100,000 may be a more accurate number).

Epilepsy continued to be a condition of confusion and controversy when in the mid-1800s, three English neurologists ushered in the modern era of epilepsy. At this time, one of the neurologists, John Hughlings Jackson, defined a seizure as "an occasional, excessive and disorderly discharge of nerve tissue on the muscles." From Jackson and others, epilepsy was declared to come from the brain. Several years later, in 1904, the American William Spratling coined the term epileptologist, a doctor who specializes in epilepsy.

In 1912, the first seizure medication, phenobarbital, was created as a sedative, but it soon was found useful for seizures and it is still used today.

Eight years later the ketogenic diet was devised. This meal plan is high in fat and proteins. It is meant to simulate the effects of fasting, a state that can decrease seizures.

In 1929, the German psychiatrist, Hans Berger, invented the electroencephalogram or EEG recording method. This made it possible to record the brain's electrical currents without opening the skull.

In the next 30 years, a host of new epilepsy medications were introduced to treat and prevent the range of seizures.

In 1909, the International League against Epilepsy was founded, and in 1968 the Epilepsy Foundation of America, along with the American Epilepsy Society, the Epilepsy Therapy Project, {the Klingenstein Foundation and the CURE Foundation} and particularly the National Institutes of Health. These are now the main organizations dedicated to fighting epilepsy.

Even in the 20th century, some states had laws forbidding people with epilepsy to marry or have children. Luckily, this practice was ended with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

During the next 10 years, new medications provided even more seizure control and in 1997, the FDA approved a device, the vagus nerve stimulator, to treat partial epilepsy in adults.

It's clear that people with epilepsy have come a long way toward healing and society has come a long way toward understanding.