25 March 2020

Go purple and get talking about epilepsy

Look around the office, the classroom or the gym and chances are you know someone who quietly suffers from epilepsy.

One in 25 Australians has the disease, yet many keep it hidden due to stigma and discrimination.

26 March is Purple Day, people from around the globe are asked to talk about epilepsy, and those who live with seizures are reminded they are not alone.

Sunshine Coast and Hospital Health Service Neurologist, Dr Antony Winkel, said epilepsy was a common brain disorder which takes the form of recurring seizures.

“Epilepsy is not just one condition; it is a diverse family of disorders comprising of many seizure types,” Dr Winkel said.

“To say a person has epilepsy simply means that a person has shown a tendency to have recurring seizures. Therefore, when a person has a single seizure this does not necessarily mean that they have epilepsy. There are seizures linked to range of other health conditions, for example diabetes or heart conditions, and up to 1 in 10 people will experience a seizure at some point in their life.

“Epilepsy can develop at any age, and has no racial, social class, national or geographical boundaries. I would like to remind those living with epilepsy that they are not alone, it’s a common condition,” he said.

Aimee Thomas was diagnosed with epilepsy when she was 36 years old and 11 weeks pregnant. Apart from one previous seizure, she had no family or medical history that would indicate a predisposition.

“It can be indiscriminate and can happen at any stage of life, not just when you are a child or teenager.

“It’s been a year since my diagnosis, it is important to remember that life goes on. I was diagnosed whilst pregnant and also caring for my 4 year old son,” Aimee said.

“We had to put measures in place so that my son could get help if we were alone when I experienced one. My husband also ordered me a very subtle medical ID bracelet with his contact details and my work arranged for a medical plan to be put in place. For a period, I was also not allowed to drive.

“Fortunately, to date none of these measures have had to be used. My epilepsy is controlled by medication and also ensuring I get enough sleep and keep stress to a minimum.
"I am open and honest when I complete the medical condition section on forms. It is interesting because the more people I mention it to, the more common I realise epilepsy is. It is nothing to be afraid of and can be managed," Aimee said.

Dr Winkel advised if someone is having a seizure, do not restrain their movements, do not force anything into their mouth, and do not give them water, medication or food until they are fully alert.

"People often think that when someone has a seizure, you need to stop them from choking on their tongue and restrain their movements. People can't choke on their tongue: it's physically impossible," he said.

If someone is having a seizure:

- Time the seizure
- Protect from injury by removing hard objects from the area, placing something soft under the person's head and loosening any tight clothing
- Gently roll the person onto their side as soon as it is practical to do so
- Reassure and reorientate the person as they regain consciousness
- Stay with the person until the seizure has ended and they are fully alert

"Call 000 immediately if the seizure activity lasts five or more minutes, if a second seizure follows quickly, if the person remains non-responsive for more than five minutes after the seizure stops, or if the person is injured, diabetic, pregnant or has swallowed water.

"Also call 000 if you don't know them, it is their first seizure, or you feel uncomfortable dealing with the seizure," Dr Winkel said.

Purple Day was founded in 2008 by a young Canadian girl called Cassidy Megan, and it has since become a global campaign dedicated to increasing epilepsy awareness worldwide.

For more information visit www.epilepsyqueensland.com.au

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