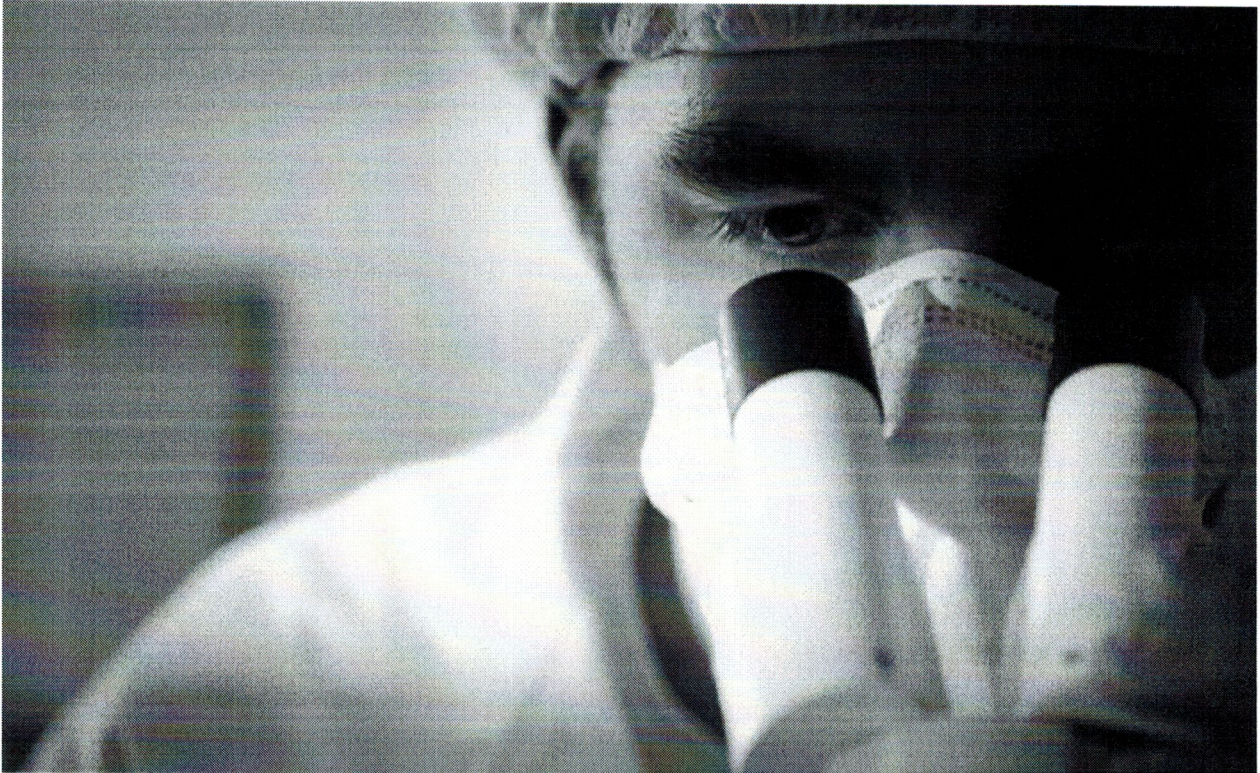




“I Will Take My Own Life”: The Link Between Mental Health And Epilepsy

EPILEPSY Jaime Weatherbee, Manager of Donors and Administration of Epilepsy Canada, still remembers the email. It was one of dozens in her inbox that September morning but it was nothing like the others.



Biopharmaceutical companies are researching the positive effects of various plant extracts towards finding new anti-seizure medications.

“I don’t know why I am writing this,” a man wrote, “I just feel I should tell somebody what is about to happen.” He went on to paint a bleak picture of his life. Debilitating seizures prevented him from working and he was unable to support his child. He spent most of his time alone. “Soon,” he wrote, “I will take my own life.”

Weatherbee immediately called a suicide prevention hotline in the man’s area. She was told they couldn’t help unless he contacted them directly. She sent an email to the man, urging him to make the call. No response. She contacted the RCMP, who managed to reach him. Two months later, she describes the incident as “paralyzing. I mean, what could I do? I just felt helpless.”

Great strides in treatment

About 30 percent of people with epilepsy suffer regular seizures — dozens a day, in some severe cases — and the impact on their lives ranges from disruptive to debilitating. The unfortunate few who also suffer from unrelated mental health problems are sometimes overwhelmed by despair. Every two months, Epilepsy Canada receives a message from

someone contemplating suicide. But there is hope. We've seen great strides in the treatment of this neurological disorder in recent years. Today, most of the 300,000 Canadians who have epilepsy live full lives — and these numbers are expected to grow.

"With the help of so many people in so many ways, I'm sure we'll find a cure."

"A lot
of
people
are

working hard to come up with better medications," says Michael Poulter, Professor and Director of the graduate neuroscience program at the Western University's, Robarts Research Institute. He notes that small biopharmaceutical startups are now devoting resources to the development of anti-seizure medications.

Himalayan flower extract a possible treatment

Poulter has launched his own start-up, OB Pharmaceuticals, hoping to bring to human trials the most promising anticonvulsant he has ever studied. It was found in the root extract from a small flower that grows high in the Himalayas. A tea brewed from the plant's crushed roots has reportedly been used to control seizures for centuries in that region. Pakistani scientists (lead by Professor M. Iqbal Choudhary) who isolated the active component and developed the manufacture of it introduced the molecule to Poulter in 2009.

Of course, this molecule isn't the only one attracting attention. "Just the other day I talked to someone who is interested in using extract(s) from the marijuana plant to control seizures," Poulter explains. "The hope is that an extract could one day be used as an add-on, a supplement to established medication that many not be working as well as hoped."

While a new anti-seizure medication might be discovered through a concerted effort, it might also be discovered by accident. "Sometimes a use for a drug is just stumbled upon," Poulter explains. "For example, in the 1950s a drug that was thought to be an antihistamine turned out to be an antipsychotic that was effective in treating schizophrenia." And of course, Viagra was intended to treat high blood pressure. It was just a happy coincidence that it could treat erectile dysfunction or impotence.

Breakthrough 'just around the corner'

Six years ago, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved an anticonvulsant that prevents seizures by decreasing abnormal excitement in the brain. Poulter says the introduction of this drug, Levetiracetam (sold as Keppra), was the last big breakthrough in the treatment of epilepsy. Given the current efforts of researchers and the advocates who support them, he believes another big breakthrough is just around the corner.

That is music to the ears of Gary Collins, Executive Director of Epilepsy Canada. "As someone living with epilepsy, I always feel badly for those whose lives have been deeply affected by our disorder," he says. "I'm most fortunate that mine is managed effectively through medication and I can live a near normal life."

Jacques Brunelle, President of the Board of Epilepsy Canada, acknowledges the importance of improved treatment for seizures. That, he says, combined with efforts to eliminate the stigma associated with epilepsy, should go a long way to improving the lives of people living with it. "With the help of so many people in so many ways," he says, "I'm sure we'll find a cure."

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