

THE EPILEPTIC SCHOOL LEAVER

J. SAPERIA, M.B., B.Ch., B.A.O.

Leyton, London

THE youth who leaves school and has epilepsy is under handicap, due almost invariably to the ignorant fears of the public and not to his disease. Many people have the impression that the epileptic suffers from mental deficiency and is subject to uncontrollable criminal impulses. Thus the epileptic school leaver has two concurrent problems, first to find a suitable job and secondly whether to disclose the epilepsy to the employer.

In April 1963 in the City of Belfast there were 6,422 15- and 16-year-old children at school. Most children leave school at the age of 15 years and form the bulk of the 6,500 school leavers a year. The majority of these (excluding grammar school leavers, most of whom are going on to further education and training) are seen by the youth employment officers. Many youths make further use of this service until they become 18 years old. A note of all disabled school leavers is kept by the youth employment officers, and in co-operation with the Ministry of Labour they also try to help those who have already left school. In April 1963 only five epileptics aged under 18 were on the unemployment register, though others may have existed who had not registered either with the Ministry of Labour or the Youth Employment Service. Three of these five unemployed epileptics had just left school; of the other two one had already had a few jobs and one had a personality problem which was a much greater disability than his epilepsy.

Amongst the 6,422 15- and 16-year-old children were 38 epileptics who were known to the school's medical officer (an incidence of 5.9 in 1,000). Their placing in schools is shown in table I.

By November 1963, 22 of these 38 epileptic children were still at school, ten had left, five ineducable were attending day centres and one gipsy child had been lost trace of.

TABLE I
EDUCATIONAL STANDARD OF 38 EPILEPTIC CHILDREN IN APRIL 1963

	15 years old	16 years old	I.Q.
Ineducable	2	3	Below 50
Special school for educationally subnormal	3	4	50—75
Special class in normal school	8	5	70—90
Normal class in normal school	11	2	normal (over 90)

In December 1963, the ten school leavers were followed up to investigate their employment; whether it was of their own choosing, if it was skilled and if they had informed their employers of their epilepsy. The results are shown in table II.

TABLE II

Sex and age	Employment	Own choice	Skilled	Did employers know of their epilepsy?
Male —16 years	Packer in linen mill	Yes	Semi-skilled	No
Female —16 years	Making handkerchiefs	Yes	Semi-skilled	No
Female —16 years	Specialist work in linen weaving	Yes	Yes	No
Female —16 years	First job: laundry checker	No	No	Yes
	Second job: office work	Yes	Yes	No
Male —16 years	Apprentice cabinet-maker	Yes	Yes	Yes
Female —16 years	Spinning-mill various jobs	Yes	Semi-skilled	Yes
Female —16 years	None (She had an I.Q. of 76 and had attended E.S.N. school.) (Now she is under supervision of special-care service.)			
Male —15 years	Laundry delivery man	No	No	Yes
Male —15 years	None			
Female —15 years	Spinner in linen	Yes	Semi-skilled	No.

The school leaver does not find difficulty in obtaining work because it is easy to find 'dead-end' employment, e.g. errand-boy where wages are poor, work is unskilled, no training for a trade is

received and the youth will be dismissed at the age of 18 years. He will then be replaced by another school leaver and so save the employer paying the wages of an adult. Thus the youth at the age of 18 is without a trade and will later form the hard core of the problem-group of men over the age of 45 who are unemployed.

In 1958, the problem of unemployment among epileptics of all ages was investigated by N. Gordon and S. Russell from among those attending the National Hospital, Queen Square, London. They were surprised to find that the number of unemployed epileptics was so low. This survey in an area of high unemployment—nearly 8 per cent, reinforces their findings that epilepsy itself is rarely a bar to employment, but either a low level of intelligence or a personality disorder provide the cause of unemployment. This is in contrast to the Ministry of Health report 1956 'Medical Care of Epileptics' which states that finding jobs for epileptics is difficult. My own general practice has 18 epileptics in 3,000 patients, i.e. an incidence of 6 in 1,000. Only one of employable age is not working, this is not due to her epilepsy. The others are leading normal lives not obviously affected by their epilepsy.

The social problem is to educate the general public into accepting epilepsy as the minor disability which in truth it is. Epileptics are people; with suitable care and encouragement they can follow normal lives. One way of educating the public might be to show on television a person having a major epileptic fit. Common sense precautions are all that is needed to ensure that the employer is under no special liability for accidents to epileptics at work. The National Insurance (Industrial Injuries) Act, 1946 covers epileptics in exactly the same way as other workers.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Drs D. A. Pond and L. J. Hurwitz for their stimulating advice; to Dr A. L. Walby for making readily available the facts and figures; to Miss V. McQuaker for co-ordinating so many useful appointments in such a short time; and to the College of General Practitioners for the award of an Upjohn Travelling Fellowship which made the study possible.
