

NEWS

*Monday Edition***Medical Experts Investigate Epilepsy Epidemic**

By CHRIS MBUNWE

Sixteen Canadian medical experts were in Ngie Subdivision in Momo Division, Northwest Province recently to continue with an in-depth investigation into the incidence of epilepsy.

EPILEPSY, which is becoming an apparent epidemic in Momo Division, is a major problem and an important cause of mortality and disability in developing countries.

Observations made by the Association of Orphans and the Disabled, ASODI, in Ngie, by its CEO, Jerome Ambanibe, and confirmed by Dr. Atoosa Kourosch, estimate that more than 40 percent adult population of Ngie is infected by epilepsy.

This illness in Ngie appears to be an early childhood onset seizure disorder that lasts well into adulthood, being life long in most cases.

It has been established that the increased incidence of epilepsy in Ngie is caused by neuro-cysticercosis caused by taenia solium.

More specifically, the experts say epilepsy patients in Ngie have a higher percentage of sero-positive to taenia solium than a matched unrelated control population.

Unconfirmed reports indicate that in most patients, the seizures are primary generalised but in some cases could be secondarily generalised convulsion.

There are many accounts of severe seizure-related injuries -burns, falls, death and so on

from uncontrolled status epilepticus and drownings.

Patients with partial complex seizures as manifested by blinking and staring may have recurrent attacks within the day and nights with seizure frequency of 10 to 15 times a day.

According to the medial experts, patients with generalised or possibly secondarily generalised convulsive seizures have seizures about three to five times a day.

In Cameroon, epilepsy is believed to be caused by ill will, supernatural forces and witchcraft, leading to high levels of stigmatisation, incrimination and discrimination. Therefore, those who have epilepsy may be hidden away by their families. Most do not receive education or work. In addition to an immense human tragedy, this health problem has become a devastating social and economic problem for the region.

Over the past few years, ASODI has assembled a cohort of 550 patients in Ngie mostly children and adolescents with epilepsy. This number, which represents only a fraction of the number of cases in the region is increasing at a rate of 5-10 newly identified cases per month.

The Njikwa Subdivision has about 300 patients, Widikum 400 patients, Mbengwi Central 150 patients.

There seems to be a markedly increased incidence of childhood onset seizures in the whole of Momo Division, but Ngie appears to be the epicenter of this epilepsy outbreak.

Treating Epilepsy

For developing countries, the Phenobarbital drug has been found useful in the treatment of epilepsy. While this drug may be available through the central pharmaceutical supply chain, it is not accessible to most of the patients.

For the past two years, ASODI CEO and his staff have provided educational sessions with members of the community and distributed the drugs to the villages affected by epilepsy.

A significant number of the patients have been found to be Phenobarbital responsive, with either decreased frequency or total cessation of seizures whole on the medicine provided through funds donated by charitable groups.

While in Ngie, two of the Canadian medical experts - Irene Elliot and Mary Douglas handed supplies worth more than FCFA 1.5 million to ASODI for the investigation which will include blood screening from door to door to identify causes and people living with epilepsy.

At every meeting with the epilepsy patients in most of the villages, the Canadian health officials told the population to watch out against pork which is not well cooked.

They explained that epilepsy patients in Ngie and Cameroon as a whole have a higher percentage of neuro-cysticercosis especially in areas where pigs are raised as a food source.

It should be noted that pigs are common in Momo as in other parts of Northwest and West Provinces where they are often kept close to houses on tethers or in small pens.