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Drug Switching could be Rx for Trouble

Columbus, Ohio—For the 220,000 Ohioans living with epilepsy, a routine trip to the pharmacy can be a life-threatening event. Many epilepsy patients are experiencing the alarming trend of drug switching. This occurs when a pharmacist, motivated to cut costs, takes patients off the medication that is working for them and switches them to another variation of the medication. The switch can be from a name brand to generic, or from one generic to another.

People who take anti-seizure medicine are particularly at risk. The Epilepsy Foundation of Central Ohio and epilepsy foundations throughout Ohio are lobbying for state legislation to stop inappropriate drug switching.

The legislation is called Epilepsy Right to Know, and it requires pharmacists to notify the patient and physician when they substitute a different drug. Nancy Brantner, Executive Director of the Epilepsy Foundation of Central Ohio says, “Generic medications are harmless for most people. But people who take anti-seizure drugs may be especially sensitive to changes in their medications.”

During months of hearings at the Ohio Statehouse, legislators heard stories from patients and their caregivers about the horrifying consequences of drug switching.
Ohioans have lost jobs because a switch-induced seizure took away too much of their thinking power. One woman seized while pregnant, putting her baby at risk.

“Small variations in medicine can bring on seizures, even in people who have been seizure-free for years. People suffer accidents, injuries, even death, from these sudden seizures,” Brantner says.

Dr. Jean Cibula, Neurologist, says that “changing a prescription can very subtly change the absorption of the medication and it could be just enough that a person could have breakthrough seizures.” She adds, “Seizures are too dangerous to allow prescription changes without approval.”

Brantner says, “Epilepsy Right to Know will prevent that from happening because there will be better communication between health care professionals. As part of a statewide campaign to pass the law before the legislature adjourns this fall, advocates from across Ohio have traveled to the Statehouse to testify at hearings, visit their legislators, and write letters. After more than a year of lobbying, Brantner is hopeful that the bill will pass and her members will have greater protection.

She believes Epilepsy Right to Know is good public policy for all Ohioans, not just those living with the disease. “It’s about your right – the right to control your own health,” Brantner says.

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