

When the Odds Are in Your Favor: Marla Wright's Epilepsy First Aid Training Helps Young Man in Las Vegas

Epilepsy Foundation Training is Put to Use in Real World



Marla Wright

Marla Wright spends her professional life thinking about epilepsy. As director of payer marketing at Greenwich Biosciences Inc., a leader in researching cannabinoid medicines for rare epilepsies, she's on the front lines of addressing the disease that affects roughly one out of every 26 people.

But Wright never thought she would be on the front lines of helping someone in the midst of a full-blown tonic-clonic seizure. Especially so soon after receiving epilepsy first aid training. The month before, the Carlsbad, Calif.-based biopharmaceutical company had arranged for the Epilepsy Foundation to train its staff on assisting someone having a seizure.

"I went to the training and was thinking, 'Gosh, I've never seen anyone have a seizure, I wouldn't know what to do'" Wright recalls of her knowledge level on that day.

The Foundation's training covered techniques such as making sure the person is safe, cushioning their head, putting them on their side, loosening any tight clothing around their neck, looking for a medical alert bracelet, timing the seizure, and never putting anything in their mouth.

"It was simple and easy to learn, it's simpler than CPR," Wright says. "But honestly, I thought to myself, this is nice to know, but I'll never have to use it."

Right Time-Right Place in Vegas

Fast forward a month and Wright is in Las Vegas attending a conference of the American Society of Health System Pharmacists, a bustling meeting of more than 80,000 attendees who take over an entire convention center.

On this day, Wright had met up with a business acquaintance and the two had set off to find a quiet spot to talk. After going up an escalator and down a long, crowded hallway, they finally found a standing table where they could get down to business. That plan was about to be interrupted.

"My colleague had just opened up her computer and was showing me something, when all of a sudden, directly to my right, I hear this *thump*," Wright remembers. "I looked over and there was a relatively young gentleman, in his 20s, and he was having a full tonic-clonic seizure. Right there beside me, he was on the ground."

Wright immediately jumped into action.

"I was like, 'Oh my god, I know what to do. I was just trained by the Epilepsy Foundation'" she remembers telling those around her. "I go, we need to get him on his side, we need to get something under his head. He had his badge around his neck, and I asked if anyone knew him, and there were some of his pharmacy student colleagues with him."

By this time, a crowd of about 50 had gathered around to observe. “Some were saying, ‘We’ve got to call 911!’” she recalls. “Of course, they called 911 right away.”

Epilepsy Foundation training calls for checking to see if the person experiencing a seizure is wearing a medical ID bracelet, or confirming from family and friends if that person has a history of epilepsy. If so, the guidelines suggest waiting to see if the seizure lasts more than 5 minutes before calling 911. In Las Vegas, the crowd made the correct move, given that the man wasn’t wearing a medical bracelet and bystanders couldn’t confirm if he had epilepsy.

Meanwhile, Wright stayed on the ground, observing the gentleman who was breathing very rapidly and shaking his entire body. “I told his colleagues to please get down on the floor with me. I wanted him to see them when he became aware, I wanted him to see some familiar faces,” she said.

Wright didn’t know what to expect when the seizure stopped. And when it was over, she realized that she had no idea how long it had gone on. Fortunately, someone timed it at 3.5 minutes.

What surprised her was how completely unaware the young man had been about what had just happened. “He came to and looked at me. I said, ‘You’re safe. Have you ever had a history of seizures?’” she asked him. He said he had never had a seizure and he wasn’t wearing a medical alert bracelet.

When the paramedics arrived, they started to ask him questions, starting with, “Do you know where you are?” His response: “no.” And then, “Do you know what year it is?” Again, “no.” It took a good three to five minutes before he became more aware. During this time, the paramedics were checking his blood pressure and sugar and pupils, says Wright. At this point, she stepped back. “The paramedics were very appreciative, and said I did all of the right things.”

Serendipitous Moment

Wright recognizes the serendipity of the event. She had taken first aid training just the month before. She was in the right place in a massive convention center. And she works for a biopharmaceutical company that develops epilepsy drugs.

“I was just so glad I knew what to do,” she says. She also realized that she was perhaps unique among the crowd. The other 50 people had their eyes glued on her, because nobody knew what to do, except to call 911. The training is so simple, everyone should take it, she advises. Wright now passes out first aid cards from the Foundation to her friends.

Wright also credits the training for helping keep everyone calm in what is a scary, unfamiliar situation.

“The way you create calmness is through competence,” she says. “You know what to do. I just felt empowered. I’m proud of my company and proud of the Epilepsy Foundation. It was a really good feeling. I was flying high that day. I helped somebody.”

Visit the Epilepsy Foundation of San Diego County at <https://epilepsysandiego.org/>

Epilepsy is Common Neurological Condition, and Training Is Crucial to Help People Having Seizures

Epilepsy is one of the most common disorders of the central nervous system. One in 10 people will experience a seizure in their lifetime, and one in 26 will develop epilepsy. More people have epilepsy than Cerebral Palsy, Multiple Sclerosis and Parkinson's disease combined.

Jim Grisolia, MD, Scripps Health Neurologist, and executive vice president of the Epilepsy Foundation of San Diego's Board of Directors, says having epilepsy is summed up best in the words of Wilder Graves Penfield, a pioneering neurosurgeon who expanded brain surgery methods and techniques for epilepsy and other conditions.

"Epilepsy is a state of continuing dread [usually shared by his friends and family] interrupted by recurring attacks of involuntary behavior," Dr. Penfield noted.

Dr. Grisolia says this description captures the feeling of helplessness and loss of control that plagues so many people with epilepsy. "The internal struggle of living with epilepsy is matched by the external struggle of dealing with stigma, the widespread ignorance and fear about epilepsy that exists throughout the U.S. and all countries of the world," he says.

Despite ongoing challenges of the condition, others recognize that advocacy efforts are making a difference in changing attitudes. At the same time, new medications and treatments are controlling seizures of two-thirds of individuals who have epilepsy.

Wendy Urushima-Conn, president and CEO of the San Diego Epilepsy Foundation, points out that many people are living well with epilepsy. She gets to see small miracles in the lives of these folks every day.

"While we see firsthand the many struggles of people living with epilepsy, we are also fortunate to see many individuals thriving, while living with this medical challenge," she says. "These are some of the bravest, most inspirational people I know."

Case in point: Urushima-Conn's daughter who has epilepsy that is under control. Her daughter was fortunate to have knowledgeable individuals who assisted her during a seizure while at college and another one while jogging in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

Urushima-Conn also notes that her daughter helped someone who was having a seizure while she was on a semester abroad in Europe. The man was coming out of a pub in Germany.

"This big German man had a convulsive seizure in front of her," Urushima-Conn recounts. "Everyone was screaming and running around, and nobody was doing anything. My daughter ran up to him, got him on his side, and got her jacket under his head."

This man, along with the one assisted by Marla Wright in Las Vegas, was somebody's brother, or father or coworker. They are in a vulnerable and potentially dangerous situation.

"Thank god my daughter was there," Urushima-Conn notes. "And thank god in this instance, Marla was there and knew what to do for this young man who was at the conference. From a Foundation standpoint, we are thankful that she was not afraid to get up and use her training. If any of our loved ones were having a medical emergency, we'd hope that one of our good Samaritans would stop and help."

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