

The Times

Medication switches pose high risk

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As a neurologist specialized in treating patients with epilepsy, I have seen firsthand the struggle patients face when trying to find the correct medication to regulate seizures. The life-long challenge of regulating this disorder is daunting enough without having to worry that a pharmacy may substitute their medication without their knowledge. It is vital to require the informed consent of both physician and patient before substituting an epilepsy patient's anticonvulsant medication.

Epilepsy and seizures affect more than 129,000 individuals in New Jersey, and 200,000 new cases of epilepsy are diagnosed in America each year. Epilepsy is a neurological condition characterized by recurring seizures that can only be controlled by medication in the majority of patients. However, even small variations in composition between medications can cause toxic effects and/or breakthrough seizures when taken by patients with epilepsy. Patients who experience even one breakthrough seizure can lose their job, their driver's license as well as their life. Patients who experience a series of seizures without recovery in between face a life-threatening situation and significant medical costs. With epilepsy medications, it can't be "close enough" -- it has to be right or it's right to the emergency room.

You would think that such sensitive and life-affecting medication would require that patients and their physicians be involved in the decision to alter treatment. However, there is no law in the state of New Jersey to require this, which leaves our state's residents with epilepsy open to the possibility of devastating medical effects.

Fortunately, legislation has been introduced to provide such protection. The Patient Protection Bill (S2071 and A3029) requires the prior notification of patients and their prescribing physician before substitutions of anticonvulsant medications used for treating epilepsy are made.

As a doctor, I support providing each patient with the best medical care and promoting open communication among pharmacists, doctors and patients. We must ensure that patients with epilepsy have the peace of mind of knowing that they can live without the danger of unexpected seizures due to an unauthorized change in their medication. I urge our legislators to support the Patient Protection Bill -- because one breakthrough seizure, one in jury, one lost life is one too many.

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