

Shock therapy a media pet



Cohen and Solomon

Electroshock, a medical procedure that jolts a patient's brain with high-voltage electricity, fell into some disrepute during the early 1970s. But, in recent years, it has been making a comeback — with substantial help from news media.

A pair of Associated Press articles last February, for instance, extolled electroshock as "the treatment of choice for the dangerously depressed." The 3,000 words from AP, published in news pages nationwide, did not include a quote from a single opponent of electroshock.

AP declared flatly that "there remains no faster, safer way to yank people out of deadly depressions than by placing electrodes on their temples and zapping their brains with enough electricity to trigger convulsions."

Two months ago, Denver resident Mark Stout reacted angrily when he read an article in USA Today that also touted electroshock as a therapeutic marvel. "Electric shock, given to my mother to 'cure' her of the side effects of the antidepressants prescribed to 'cure' her of the distress of a divorce, cost her life," Stout wrote to the newspaper.

Overall, rather than raising tough questions, news media have tended to cheerlead the resurgent shock technique.

Electroshock got a powerful boost in July 1993 when the New York Times front-paged a laudatory article headlined, "With Reforms in Treatment, Shock Therapy Loses Shock." Out of 33 paragraphs, a total of two described the concerns of electroshock foes. The rest of the article read like a pro-shock ad.

Media outlets could easily do better. Picking up the phone, we quickly reached two doctors in the San Francisco area who have been denouncing electroshock for more than 20 years.

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fect' — it's the treatment," said psychiatrist Lee Coleman, who has written that "electroshock works by damaging the brain." Electroshock's results "are completely consistent with any acute brain injury, such as a blow to the head from a hammer. In essence, what happens is that the individual is dazed, confused and disoriented, and therefore cannot remember or appreciate current problems."

"Shock treatment is a method for producing amnesia and intimidation and terror," neurologist John Friedberg told us.

Electroshock — also known as electroconvulsive therapy, or ECT — is encountering media skepticism in Britain. Jan Wallcraft, an outspoken Londoner who underwent the procedure two decades ago as a young woman, has helped to spark recent scrutiny. The Guardian newspaper and BBC television have provided in-depth reports.

So why isn't ECT more of an issue in U.S. media?

Part of the problem is that "mental patients" don't ordinarily get much media respect. Their experiences and perspectives are often discounted or tacitly disdained. What's more, coercive measures against them rarely arouse wide concern.

For several years, a group called Support Coalition, based in Eugene, Ore., has been working to draw attention to harsh violations of the rights of people stigmatized with psychiatric labels. Obstacles include a lot of prejudice and indifference.

In 1990, Project Censored cited human rights violations involving electroshock as one of the "most

censored stories" of the year. But the subject still gets very little press notice — despite the fact that many people are directly affected.

The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that 110,000 Americans now receive electroshock each year. In theory, the vast majority do so voluntarily. But some are pushed through legal loopholes and subjected to electroshock against their expressed will. Others are forced into bogus "agreement" in the midst of coercion or confusion.

Talk show host Dick Cavett has praised electroshock therapy for saving him from serious depression. Yet, his own words shed light on circumstances that commonly render informed-consent rules meaningless: "The hospital requires a release for ECT. I was so disoriented I couldn't figure out what they were asking me to sign, but I signed anyway."

Cavett added, "In my case ECT was miraculous." But, for many others, electroshock has been horrendous.

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No one should undergo a potentially damaging medical procedure without truly voluntary and informed consent. Such consent cannot really exist when hospitals — and mass media — withhold vital information.

"Organized psychiatry and leading electroshock advocates are determined not to tell patients about the risks of ECT," writes Peter R. Breggin, a psychiatrist and author who heads the Center for the Study of Psychiatry. "As long as those in control and authority paint so benign a picture of so dangerous a treatment, psychiatrists and mental health practitioners in general are not likely to feel obliged to warn potential patients about its hazards."

Jeff Cohen is executive director of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting. Norman Solomon is co-author of "Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in the News Media."

Court: Woman entitled to shock therapy

WAUSAU (AP) — A state appeals court Wednesday cleared the way for doctors to perform rare electric shock therapy on a severely depressed woman in an attempt to save her life.

The 3rd District Court of Appeals ruled that a state law requiring the 69-year-old Green Bay woman to give her consent to such therapy was unconstitutional because it denied her the fundamental right to life.

Denying the woman "this life-saving medical procedure" because she is so ill she cannot give

her consent violates her right to equal protection of the laws, the three-judge panel said.

The woman was identified in the decision only as Ruth E.J.

"Justice compels us to review the issue because the effects of Ruth's depression threaten her life and the requirements of (the consent law) deny her the only treatment likely to reverse her condition," the appeals court said.

The unanimous decision reversed a ruling by Brown County Circuit Judge Richard Greenwood who refused to grant a court order

allowing the therapy as sought by the woman's guardian.

The judge said he had no authority to order it without the patient's informed consent.

The woman, single with no children, has refused to eat or drink and has lost 40 pounds since she was involuntarily committed to the Brown County Mental Health Center in April, court records said.

Doctors determined the electric shock therapy was the only treatment with any chance of "successfully and timely" lifting the woman's depression.

She is fed with a tube and suffers from near-dehydration and starvation, court records said.

The treatment involves sending enough electricity into the body to bring about convulsions, said Dr. Edward Orman, a psychiatrist in Green Bay who has been involved in the woman's case.

The treatment is usually used as a last resort in severely depressed patients who have not responded to medication, he said.

He called it "extraordinarily unusual" to seek a court order to perform any treatment.

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