

Torture or Treatment: Electroconvulsive Therapy

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Little was known about the existence of mental illnesses and disorders in the earliest period of recorded history. Ancient civilizations described mental disorders as a combination of disordered attention, concentration, emotions, and personalities. As such, various non-pharmacological techniques, such as administering herbal remedies and surgically removing a portion of the brain, were used by physicians and medical practitioners in order to restore order to the afflicted individual. One non-pharmacological method in particular that has raised the most controversy and debate in the last 100 years is electroconvulsive therapy.

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), also known as electroshock therapy, was discovered in 1938 by Italian neuropsychiatrists, Lucio Bini and Ugo Cerletti. ECT is a psychiatric treatment that utilizes electrical currents to generate a seizure in persons with severe mental illnesses. The concept of ECT existed as early as the 16th century, but only relatively recently has it become a revolutionary shock treatment for psychological disorders. For ten to twenty years after the therapy was first implemented in the 1930s, many medical practitioners were trained to use and provide ECT when medications could not properly control severe mental disorders. However, there has been much debate between practitioners, the public, and patients about whether the method is an effective treatment or inhumane torture for the mentally ill. Although the practice of ECT briefly declined in the 1960s due to the anti-psychiatry movement and the seemingly inhumane nature of the procedure, ECT has slowly integrated back into the medical field in the last 40 years. Muscle relaxants and anaesthetics are provided as supplements and further precautions are applied to prevent complications and to promote greater success with the treatment. Today, ECT is considered an effective form of treatment for persons with severe mood disorders.

From the machinery to the method of administration, a vast amount of research has been conducted on ECT, and continues to grow today. Modern ECT was found to be a very controlled procedure. Many precautions, such as built-in safety features in the machinery and consistent health monitoring by health care professionals, were observed to help ensure the safety of the patient. However, due to the historical context of ECT and psychiatry, many myths and misconceptions about ECT still exist and have contributed to the controversy inherent in the topic. It is hypothesized, that further educating and raising awareness on ECT, is one of the few, but effective, methods to gain widespread understanding and/or acceptance of this psychiatric treatment.

This research project recounted the early development of electroconvulsive therapy among other non-pharmacological interventions used in psychiatry. The discovery of ECT and its technological advancement from shock therapy is also described. This paper also examined the uses and controversy surrounding electroconvulsive therapy in a brief literature review and documented the ECT experience of a patient as well as an ECT practitioner in semi-structured interviews.