

CHAPTER 1

ABSTRACT

Electro convulsive therapy is one of the most controversial treatments in psychiatry¹. The nature of the treatment itself, history of abuse, unfavorable media presentations, compelling testimony of former patients, special attention by the legal system, uneven distribution of ECT use among practitioners and facilities, and uneven access by patients all contribute to the controversial context¹. However its effectiveness in treating severe mental illness is well recognized.

The idea of ECT is frightening to many people. The dramatic nature of the treatment combined with what can be understood as a natural fear of having an electric current passed through the brain means that the treatment could be seen as a form of punishment. This is in contrast to the current statement for patients from the Royal College of Psychiatrists that over 80% of patients are satisfied with ECT².

THE CURRENT STUDY

A descriptive study to ascertain patients' perspectives on ECT was carried out. Fifty patients who had ECT in either 2002 or 2003 at the University Psychiatric Unit, National Hospital of Sri Lanka were interviewed. Patients who had received ECT in 2002 were interviewed 6 to 18 months after their last course of ECT and patients who received ECT in 2003 were interviewed just before their discharge from the inpatient

unit. Their experiences of ECT and their attitudes to it are described. There was no significant difference in the experiences and attitudes between two groups.

Majority (92%) found ECT a helpful treatment and not particularly frightening. Eighty four percent (84%) of the patients agreed that if necessary they would readily have the treatment again.

The commonest persistent side effect was memory lapse (mainly autobiographical memory during the time of treatment), found in 26% of the patients but they did not find it as irritating or incapacitating.

Patients' understanding about the treatment was very poor and it is clear that patients wish to be told more about the treatment.

The procedure of obtaining informed consent for ECT appears to be grossly inadequate. Only 30% of the patients signed the consent form, but the majority of subjects in the study were more than happy to leave all decisions about their treatment to a doctor. There was hardly any concern about consent procedures being inadequate.