

Electroconvulsive Therapy Must Be Stopped

Treating the Mentally Ill, 2004
From Opposing Viewpoints in Context

John Breeding is a psychologist in private practice in Austin, Texas. He is also the director of Texans for Safe Education, a citizens group that opposes increasing prescriptions of psychiatric drugs to schoolchildren. In addition, he is the director of Wildest Colts Resources, a nonprofit organization that trains adults to help troubled young people.

It is wrong to force people to undergo a treatment as risky and controversial as electroshock therapy, which causes brain damage, memory loss, and sometimes even death. Forced electroshock violates people's civil rights and freedom of thought and choice. Doctors who force this procedure on their patients justify the abuse by perpetuating two lies. First, they declare that people who are "mentally ill" are incompetent, irrational, and dangerous and that, therefore, the state has the right to decide what is best for them. Labeling people in this way allows psychiatrists to treat them as less than human and to deprive them of their right to refuse the application of high-voltage electricity to the brain. Second, psychiatrists justify the use of electroshock therapy by asserting that it is a helpful treatment. In fact, it is an extremely dangerous and damaging procedure that has no positive lasting effects. Electroshock also causes the victims to suffer emotionally for years afterward.

My name is John Breeding. I am a psychologist from Austin, Texas. I have worked with many people in distress over 20 years of practice, including a number of victims of electroshock. I have also spent considerable time studying the research and writing on electroshock.... I have also been on the advisory board of the World Association of Electroshock Survivors, an organization consisting of individuals who at one time received this so-called treatment and later organized to push for a ban on electroshock.

I am convinced that electroshock is dangerous, harmful, and unnecessary. Doctors who perpetrate this procedure on their patients are committing a gross violation of their sacred Hippocratic oath, to "First, do no harm." The infliction of electroshock on an unconsenting individual, which this hearing is addressing today, is one of our planet's greatest evils.

I want to say a bit more about the World Association of Electroshock Survivors. This and other groups like it, such as the Committee for Truth in Psychiatry and the larger Support Coalition International, represent thousands of individuals who received electroshock. Please reflect for a moment on the fact that these recipients of a supposedly beneficial therapeutic treatment are now organizing to actively seek a ban protecting their fellow citizens from the procedure because they conclude it has caused them permanent, grave harm. Have you ever heard of such a thing? If this were a standard medical procedure, there would surely be a serious re-evaluation of that procedure and probably a complete moratorium until proper investigation was completed. And if there were any substance at all to the claims, the procedure would likely be outlawed. At the very least, there would be a rigorous informed consent procedure explaining all risks and benefits ... and most importantly and most assuredly, absolutely no one would be forced to undergo such a controversial and risky treatment.

This all seems clear and straightforward enough when you look at physical medicine. But there are many significant differences between physical medicine and psychiatry, most important of which is that

no one is forced into physical medical treatment. Even the right to die is honored. Only in psychiatry is it literally true that adult citizens are forced to take their so-called medicine, including, of course, the "medicine" we are discussing today, electroshock.

What justifies forced treatment?

I have spent many hours trying to understand the rationale for forced electroshock, and achieving such understanding is extremely difficult. Here in New York, the Statue of Liberty stands as a beacon to the world reminding all that America is synonymous with liberty. Our Supreme Court clearly acknowledges that psychiatric incarceration is a massive curtailment of civil rights. Forced electroshock is even worse; not only physical liberty is deprived, but also freedom of thought and feeling and expression. And not only the freedom, but even the ability is permanently altered and lessened.

How is it justified? The best I can figure is that there are two fundamental lies that justify such a brutal and ruthless violation of human freedom. The first is this: People labeled "mentally ill" are incompetent, irrational and dangerous. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the state as *parens patriae* of these unfortunate souls to do what is best for them. So this justifies massive curtailment of liberty and forced application of high voltage electricity to the brain, against an individual's wishes and informed consent, in a country that claims to place highest value on liberty and freedom of choice.

This hearing [on forced electroshock by the New York Assembly] has come about at least in part because of the ongoing legal challenge to the determined effort of Pilgrim Psychiatric Center psychiatrists to electroshock Paul Henri Thomas again and again and again, already more than 40 [times]! Listen to the following words of Mr. Thomas now in light of the tragic notion that forced electroshock is a justifiable deprivation of his liberty and freedom of choice because he is an incompetent, mentally ill, child-like sick person, incapable of rational choices about his treatment. As you listen, remember that you are not sitting in the anointed cabinet of a totalitarian dictatorship or politburo. Let his words come to you in your positions as elected representatives of the people of New York in the United States of America, a democracy where the principle of liberty is meant to reign supreme.

Testimony of an electroshock patient

The words of Paul Henri Thomas:

The forced electroshock is horrible. It is horrible. This torture and traumatization is not for what I did wrong. I am being tortured because I devoted myself to helping people as much as possible.

I am aware that to obtain progress for humanity we have to suffer and endure. We have to absorb these things. Other people ask me whether I think my life is miserable because I receive forced electroshock. No. The people doing this to me are miserable. I have my pride and self-respect.

I am strong. But no human being is invincible.

This is an arbitrary process of court hearings and submitting me to a "court order" of

electroshock treatment.

Do something, please! I need my freedom. I have all the rights of a respectable human being and all his duties.

It is virtually impossible to really hear this man and fail to realize that a great and tragic act of oppression has taken place in New York under the auspices of state sanctioned psychiatry.

Psychiatry dehumanizes people

Is his case or his eloquence unique? Not in my direct experience with scores of electroshock survivors. Paul Henri Thomas, like many others, is not being shocked because it is best for his "mental illness" that has rendered him dangerously incompetent. The sad truth is that he is shocked because psychiatry is bereft of understanding and compassion. Viewing individuals as dangerous and incompetent allows psychiatrists to treat them as less than human and justifies taking away their freedom and dignity and right of choice, hallmarks of their humanity.

As I grapple with attempting to understand how this horror is justified, the second thing I come up with is that those who force electroshock on people must assert that it is a good thing to do, a benevolent, helpful act. It would be hard to justify forced pain and brain damage—that's called torture, the stuff of cruel human rights violations evident throughout history and even to this day. Psychiatrists once acknowledged that electroshock's "therapeutic" effect was a result of brain damage, but have necessarily become more image conscious today. Autopsies of several decades ago routinely verified the brain damage, but autopsies following electroshock-related deaths are not performed today. Think about it: since the natural electrical activity of the brain is in millivolts (thousandths of a volt), how could a surge of 150 volts or more directly into the brain not cause brain damage? It is a challenge for all of us to retain our common sense in the face of confusing psychiatric rhetoric. The truth is pretty simple:

The dangers of electroshock

Electroshock always causes brain damage. The question is only how much.

Electroshock always causes memory loss. The question is only how much.

Electroshock causes death. Published studies suggest the electroshock death rate is about 1 in 1000. Mortality for the elderly is much greater, about 1 in 200.

Did you know that we mostly shock our elderly? I am always at a loss to explain how psychiatric rhetoric can so cloud our basic judgement, compassion and respect for our elders that we assault them in their declining years with brain damaging electroshock and call it medical treatment. One 82-year-old woman, Lucille Austwick, was being threatened with forced electroshock, and she said, "Bull! Ridiculous!" Her friends went to court against the psychiatrists and saved her; unfortunately, many more are not saved. Elders are the most frequent victims, even though they are also at greatest risk of suffering grievous harm from electroshock.

The list of effects goes on and on, and it is an ugly picture. My own specialty is in the emotional area. There is no time for me to describe this here, but I want you to at least know that terror and shame are the regular effects of electroshock, especially forced electroshock. A woman I know, 74-year-old Mimi Greenberg of Austin, Texas, received forced electroshock. Afterwards, she was so frightened of all doctors that she dangerously neglected the real medical help she needed for many years. She shared with me that a significant part of her healing from this trauma was when she read a book of remembrances of holocaust survivors. She told me that these descriptions finally put words to the anguish she still felt from her experience with electroshock. Forced electroshock is not medicine; it is cruel torture.

Even when they acknowledge the real damage done by electroshock, its defenders still might attempt to justify it by saying the benefit is worth the dangers. Psychiatry says it works. Psychologist Harold Sackeim, of the New York State Psychiatric Institute, keeps recommending it, even though he has just published an article which, when you get past all the verbiage, shows that virtually all of the patients had relapse within six months of receiving electroshock. Not only is electroshock dangerous and harmful. Not only is there no valid explanation for its effects other than brain damage. But also it simply has no positive lasting effects.

The plain truth is that there is no rational justification for forced electroshock. I appreciate your investigation today, and I urge you to pursue legislation ending the cruel practice of forced electroshock, and restoring the fundamental American rights of free choice inherent in authentic informed consent.

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