In Favor of Wider ECT Ban

I was heartened to learn of the efforts of patient organizations and others in the Berkeley, Calif. area to ban electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). As a neurologist, I wish them success, and more seriously feel that their efforts should be on a national basis, not merely in Berkeley.

Electroconvulsive therapy should be banned in the same way that prefrontal lobotomy was banned in some countries and has gone out of use in most others.

As a neurologist and electroencephalographer, I have no doubt that ECT produces effects identical to those of a direct injury to the human brain, resulting in a condition known as "post-ECT amnesia." A neurologist might describe the symptoms as those of a subhuman level of brain function. ECT might be defined as traumatic brain damage produced by electrical means.

Most other psychiatric symptoms are eliminated—hence the 80% response rate quoted in your article. But this is at the expense of the brain damage, which may have varying effects on patients' lives, depending on their age, personality, and the number of ECT treatments.

In all cases, the "response" is due to the concussive effects of one or more sessions of ECT. The patient may lose the ability to think or remember because the brain damage destroys memory traces in the brain, and the patient has to pay for this by a reduction in mental capacity. The health of the brain is not restored.

In my view, ECT is a more reasonable alternative to brain damage because the patient becomes a conscious person. Similarly, a patient who has lost all of the symptoms of ECT may regain them after a few sessions. After a few sessions, the symptoms of ECT are those of more serious, chronic psychiatric illnesses, such as depression, schizophrenia, and manic-depressive illness.

The banning of ECT may result in the patient being rehospitalized, but it means that the patient has to pay for this. In addition, the patient has to pay for the concussive effects of ECT, which may have varying effects on patients' lives, depending on their age, personality, and the number of ECT treatments.

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