

Electro-convulsive therapy

- A very small number of patients with very severe depression may be asked to have electro-convulsive (shock) therapy (ECT).
- This type of treatment has been unfairly attacked in the media and by anti-psychiatry lobby groups.
- ECT is a very effective treatment for severe and/or psychotic depression.
- It is provided only to people whose depression has certain features. These include:
 - ◆ Depression that is life-threatening. Occasionally people stop eating and drinking with severe depression;
 - ◆ Depression accompanied by psychotic features (delusions and hallucinations);
 - ◆ Depression that fails to respond to conventional drug treatments;
 - ◆ Depression that results in severe slowing of all physical movements and mental functions (i.e. severe melancholia);
 - ◆ Depression associated with severe suicide attempts; and,
 - ◆ Depression in patients who are too medically sick to take antidepressant drugs.
- ECT is given with a general anesthetic so that the patient is asleep and has no memory of the treatment (just like any other operation!). A modern muscle relaxing drug is also given so that patients do not have violent muscle contractions (as shown in old movies). The procedure is not painful, it is as safe as other minor operations and is usually only associated with minor side-effects.
- Common side-effects on the days of treatment include:
 - ◆ Drowsiness;
 - ◆ Headache;
 - ◆ Confusion; and,
 - ◆ Muscle pain (due to the muscle-relaxing drug, not the ECT itself).
- One of the most discussed long-term side-effects is memory problems. A number of important points need to be made here:
 - ◆ Patients with severe depression have major memory problems before ECT. This is especially true in older patients;
 - ◆ Research demonstrates that most patients' mental function improves following ECT, and that when problems persist they are usually associated with ongoing depression;
 - ◆ Patients will lose memory for much of the time that they are receiving ECT. This is because ECT interferes with the electrical part of memory on the days the treatment is delivered; and,
 - ◆ Patients usually recover their full memory function within one month of finishing treatment. However, they will not recover their memory for the time they were receiving ECT or the period immediately before that.

Although ECT is safe and effective it is only used for severe depression.