

240 VOLTS

Out Of The Blues - Part Two

The use of electric shock therapy is increasing rapidly in Australia and overseas. But some prominent psychiatrists and a host of patients dispute claims that ECT is safe, effective and rarely has long lasting side-effects. **Kate Nash** and **Denny Rosey** report on this polarising issue.

For decades electric shock therapy (ECT) has been hailed in psychiatric circles as a highly effective treatment for depression. Psychiatrists frequently cite a 70 or even 80 per cent success rate. Yet there is little evidence based research to support these claims.

One of the main advocates of ECT has raised serious concerns. Dr Harold Sackheim, who headed the ECT divisions of Columbia University and New York Cornell and received grants of tens of millions of dollars over two decades to research the therapy, says psychiatrists have been loath to fully recognise the adverse effect ECT has on memory.

In a remarkably direct editorial in the *Journal of ECT* in 2000, Dr Sackheim wrote: "virtually all patients experience some degree of persistent and likely permanent amnesia. It has also become clear that for rare patients the retrograde amnesia due to ECT can be profound, with the memory loss extending back years prior to receipt of the treatment."

The data from his research was released last year. Sackheim further conceded that ECT causes frontal lobe damage significantly affecting the brain's executive functions, including working memory, logical reasoning and abstraction, problem-solving, planning and organising.

A year later Dr Sackheim and his colleagues at Columbia published additional research in the *Journal of American Medical Association* that undermined claims for ECT's long term effects: an 84 per cent relapse rate within six months.

It gives little comfort to many patients whose complaints about severe autobiographical memory loss are often dismissed by psychiatrists who they say, give their opinions little or no credence.

Dr Daniel Fisher, an American psychiatrist and member of the White House Commission on Mental Health supports this view. "It is hard for even bright, well-informed



consumers to argue against ECT, because once you are labelled mentally ill you lose your rights in society and in courts," he says.

"Most critics of ECT believe that money and subduing consumers are the motivators behind the therapy's growth around the world," he maintains.

Jenny (49) has undergone countless sessions of ECT, both bilateral and unilateral since she was 22. Jenny says she's experienced profound memory loss, cognitive impairment and lethargy with both forms. "I've met lots of people who've had ECT and they complain their memories have never come back," she says.

"I've heard voices since I was five. I thought everyone did. I was working as a registered nurse in the children's psych ward when I had a car accident in 1982. After that I lost control of the voices. Apparently the staff at the hospital where I was a working reported I was losing touch with reality.

"The first diagnosis was psychotic depression but eighteen months later that was changed to paranoid schizophrenia.

"I'm not sure why I was given ECT – it's generally administered to people who have really severe depression, not delusions. I was never asked 'Do you want ECT?' It was more 'You're going to have it, so sign this piece of paper.' My family was dead against it.

"After the first sessions, I couldn't find my way from the shops to my home, although I'd lived there since I was five years old! I used to have really bad headaches for a few days after ECT but the new general anaesthetics are not as debilitating and the recovery is quicker too."

Jenny is bemused at the improvement her psychiatrists attribute to ECT. She's felt no elevation in her moods, although she concedes she may be marginally less anxious but she says doctors do not acknowledge the severity of her memory loss or its likely cause.

"The doctors say the memory depletion is short-term but I've met lots of people who've had ECT and they complain their memories have never come back. I've travelled to New Zealand, Queensland and Tasmania and I've got photographs but I have no recollection of them.



"I feel ECT has destroyed who I am. My memory of my childhood has pretty much gone. Dad died a year ago and I can't remember the times I spent doing things with him and that's really hard. I accept some of the memory loss may be due to depression, and it may be reactive, but it was far far worse after ECT."

Jenny doesn't anticipate further ECT. "The head psychiatrist at the hospital saw me last time and he decided after twenty minutes that I had a behavioural problem not paranoid schizophrenia. I go through the same mood cycles as I did when I was having ECT, nothing's changed."

Dr Fisher was hospitalised with schizophrenia several times before he became a psychiatrist and he is concerned about the use of ECT on people without their informed and willing consent.

Elizabeth (53) was given ECT against her will after she was taken to a large public mental hospital four years ago during a manic episode. The psychiatrists took her off Lithium and administered several other drugs, none of which had any effect.

Eventually, they decided to try ECT. Elizabeth and her partner protested but the psychiatrists made it clear she would not leave hospital until she had it.

Elizabeth had ECT seven times and for a few days afterwards she felt confused and tired. When those symptoms eased however, she was horrified to find she could not remember big slabs of her life; subsequent events were hazy too.

She became seriously depressed at what she saw as the loss of her history and spent the next six months more or less in bed until a psychiatrist in private practice put her back on Lithium, added an anti-depressant and weekly counselling. Most of her lost memories have never returned.

ECT continues to be lauded by the majority of psychiatrists and many patients testify to its benefits. Kitty Dukakis, the wife of a former US presidential candidate says ECT assisted her recovery from severe depression and although she's had some memory loss, she believes the benefits outweigh the losses enough to have it again if necessary.

For many people who can no longer recall loved ones and significant times in their life, the cost has been too great.

Sackheim concedes the magnitude of the losses: "As a field we have more readily acknowledged the possibility of death due to ECT than the possibility of profound memory loss, despite the fact that adverse effects on cognition are by far ECT's most common side effects." 🌀

Left: Jenny has had innumerable ECT treatments over 27 years, and claims she has lost much of her memory about family and events.

Opposite: US psychiatrist, Dr Daniel Fisher (left), with Senator Ted Kennedy.