

ECT – The current situation in Taranaki...

In my last column I wrote about depression. If there is a positive aspect about depression, it is that it usually is able to be cured or, at least, well managed by medication, psychotherapy or, ideally, a combination of the two. But sometimes, some people are unable to take anti-depressant medications or such medications prove ineffective.

For these people, or, in some cases where depression is accompanied by psychosis, suicidal intent or refusal to eat, then ECT (Electroconvulsive Therapy) also known in lay terms as “shock treatment” may be considered as a viable and appropriate treatment.

Most of us, when thinking of ECT treatment think shock...horror...and cringe when we recall the memory of Jack Nicholas being punished with ECT treatments in the film “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”. In New Zealand, ECT has been the subject of a number of enquiries and has been found to have, at times, been misused and abused. Yet ECT can be a very effective treatment – particularly when all else has proven to be ineffective.

ECT is still used in New Zealand, including in Taranaki, particularly in the elderly population. Changes to its application and safety measures are a far cry from earlier times when ECT was administered without the use of an anaesthetic or muscle relaxant.

Today, ECT is administered in an operating theatre where patients are given a short acting general anaesthetic and a short acting muscle relaxant prior to the electric current being delivered. This results in a very mild, well controlled seizure lasting about 25 seconds. Often, those experiencing the shock have no recollection of it being administered. If there is a mild headache following the procedure, this is usually managed with Paracetamol or the like. The worst side effect can be the loss of memory for a short time before and after the treatment – just as you would expect from any procedure involving general anaesthetic.

So what is ECT? It is a form of treatment involving the administration of an electric shock to the brain via electrodes placed on the person’s head and resulting in a convulsion or seizure. It is not known how or why ECT works or what the electrically stimulated seizure does to the brain – but it is known that, unless the procedure results in a seizure, there is little or no benefit to this form of treatment.

Treatments are usually programmed for three sessions per week for up to four weeks, however many people respond positively after just one or two sessions. The person receiving the treatment and their family/whanau are fully involved and consulted throughout the process.

The Taranaki District Health Board has modern equipment and well established policies and procedures for the administration of ECT. The scandals of misuse and abuse in the past are just that - in the past.

Electroconvulsive Therapy is too important an option to ignore for effectively treating severe longstanding depression, particularly so when there is a life threatening situation.

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