Electro-Convulsive Therapy (ECT)

This booklet aims to answer some of the questions you may have about Electro-Convulsive Therapy (ECT)
X-ray Reception

Minor Injuries

Dental Clinic

ECT

Kernow Doc

Harvest Ward

Bowman Ward
This booklet aims to answer some of the questions you may have about Electro-Convulsive Therapy (ECT). You may wish to know why ECT is used, what ECT is, what it is like to have ECT and what the risks and benefits may be.

Most people who have ECT prescribed for them suffer from severe depression or, more rarely, some other major mental disorder.

Although there are tablets to help with depression and other mental illnesses, some people do not recover completely and others take a long time to recover. ECT may be the best choice of treatment - it might even be life-saving.

How it might help you

• It may be helpful if you have not got better with antidepressant medication.
• It may help you if you can’t take antidepressant drugs because of the side effects.
• It may help you if you have responded well to ECT in the past.
• It may help if you feel so overwhelmed by your depression that it is difficult for you to function at all.

Remember - if you have any concerns about being given ECT please don’t hesitate to raise them with our staff.

They will be only too happy to answer any questions you have until you are fully informed about what is going on.
How does ECT work?

During ECT, a small amount of electric stimulus is sent to the brain. This produces a seizure which affects the whole brain, including the centres which control thinking, mood, appetite and sleep. Repeated treatments alter chemical messages in the brain and bring them back to normal. This helps you begin to recover from your illness.

The treatment itself is conducted under a general anaesthetic (so you will be asleep) and takes between 4 and 6 seconds to administer, most people wake up 10 minutes later.

Research suggests that over 8 out of 10 depressed patients who received ECT respond well to the treatment. People who have had the treatment say it makes them ‘feel themselves again’ and ‘as if life was worth living again.’ Most patients recover their ability to work and lead a productive life again. ECT cannot help with any difficulties you may be facing in your life, which may have contributed to your depression. However once your depression is lifted, you will hopefully be able to deal with these problems more effectively.

Are there any side effects?

Some patients say they are confused just after waking up from the treatment but this generally clears up within an hour or so. It is quite common to have a headache or muscle ache after the treatment which goes away with simple pain killers like paracetamol, which are available in the department. There is sometimes some temporary memory loss about events, telephone numbers etc. This memory loss usually goes away in a few days or weeks, although some patients experience loss of memory for a few months.
Very rarely people suffer loss of some long-term memories. These are typically personal things only you would know. This is called autobiographical memory, an example would be a family holiday you went on 10 years ago.

However, ECT should not have any long-term effects on your memory or your intelligence. ECT is amongst the safest medical treatments given under general anaesthesia. The risk of any problems is one in 50,000 treatments which is much lower than childbirth for instance.

**What is meant by a course of ECT?**

ECT is given twice a week, on Tuesday and Friday mornings. It is not possible to say exactly how many treatments you will need. Some people get better with as few as two or three treatment sessions, while others may need as many as 12 and very occasionally more.

Your doctor will review you regularly, and you will not be offered more treatments than you require as an individual.

**Pre-assessment**

Before the treatment is started, most people will attend the department for a routine physical health check. This includes a physical examination as well as taking your pulse and blood pressure and is a requirement prior to any general anaesthetic. At this time you may also have a blood test, recording of the heart (ECG), or chest X-ray, depending on your age and physical fitness. A memory test will be performed and you may be asked questions about your mood and feelings.
A doctor will explain the treatment to you and answer any questions you may have about the treatment. Once you are happy, you will be asked to sign a consent form agreeing to the treatment.

This visit to the department also gives the opportunity to have a look around and meet the staff who will be looking after you. You will be given an appointment card telling you when your treatment course is due to begin.

Please note the DVLA state that anyone undertaking ECT should not drive for the duration of the course unless advised they are fit to do so by their Consultant.

**Will I have to give my consent and can I refuse to have ECT?**

Each time you come for treatment you will be asked if you are still giving your consent, you can refuse to have ECT and withdraw your consent at any time. Very occasionally patients who are seriously ill (actually suicidal, eating or drinking too little to stay alive for much longer, or with such bad feelings about themselves that they may refuse treatment) may be given ECT without the patient’s consent. Such patients may be subject to compulsory detention under the Mental Health Act 1983. If a situation is life threatening treatment can be given under Section 58 of the Mental Health Act.

In non-urgent situations an independent psychiatrist, sent by the Mental Health Act Commission, must agree that the treatment is necessary under Section 58 of the Mental Health Act. Some patients may also be given this treatment under the Mental Capacity Act in certain situations. This happens in very exceptional circumstances and will be authorised by your Consultant.
What happens if I don’t have ECT as recommended?

Your team will have thought very carefully about offering you this treatment. If you choose not to accept your doctor’s recommendation to have ECT, you may experience a longer and more severe period of illness and disability than might otherwise have been the case. The main alternative is drug therapy, which also has risks and complications and is not necessarily safer than ECT.

Alternative treatment options

Depending on the severity of your illness other treatment options may include:

• Antidepressant medication
• Cognitive behavioural therapy
• Psychotherapy and other types of counselling

Please ask your doctor about alternative treatment options available. They should also discuss the advantages and disadvantages of these treatments with you. This will help you choose which treatment option you wish to try.

Preparing for the treatment

As ECT treatment involves having a general anaesthetic, you must not have anything to eat or drink from midnight the day before your treatment. This includes not chewing gum or sucking boiled sweets.

If you usually take tablets in the morning, do not take them on the morning of your treatment (unless otherwise directed). Bring
your tablets with you and a nurse will give them to you after your treatment. If you develop a severe cold or feel physically unwell prior to or during your course of treatment, please contact the ECT department as this may affect your ability to have anaesthetic. You are not required to wear night clothes; loose, comfortable clothes are preferable. You will usually be escorted to the department by a member of staff or family member.

On arrival at the department a nurse will check your temperature, pulse and blood pressure. They will also check if you still wish to have the treatment and whether previous treatments caused any problems. If it is your first treatment, the anaesthetist may wish to ask you a few questions prior to treatment.

When you are about to undertake an ECT session, you will be taken into the treatment room and will be introduced to the staff who will be performing the treatment. Before you are given the anaesthetic you will be given a mask and asked to breathe oxygen. Once you are asleep you will be given a muscle relaxant which relaxes your body. You should only be asleep for a few minutes.

**Immediately after receiving ECT**

You will be transferred to the recovery area where our recovery staff will offer reassurance and make you feel as comfortable as possible. The nurse will monitor your recovery until you are fully awake and within 30 minutes you should be alert enough to take some light refreshments.

Some people wake up with no side effects at all and simply feel relaxed. Others may feel somewhat confused, this is common after receiving a general anaesthetic and generally lasts for a short period of time. You may wake up with a headache and if this happens you will be offered something for the pain.
If you are being treated as an outpatient, you will need to remain in the department for two hours after treatment and will have your temperature, pulse and blood pressure checked at intervals throughout this time. Before you leave, you will be seen by a doctor to check that you had no problems from the treatment and that you are fit to go home. You will also be asked to confirm that you will be looked after by a responsible adult for 24 hours post treatment and that you will not drink alcohol, make important decisions at this time and that you understand you should not drive for the duration of the course of your treatment unless advised that you are fit to do so by your Consultant Psychiatrist. Check with your insurance company/DVLA for further advice.

You will also receive your next appointment for treatment. If you are being treated as an inpatient, you may be able to return to your ward sooner, but you will require your temperature, pulse and blood pressure checking on your return.

**Additional information or support**

If you would like more information about ECT please ask a member of staff or your Care Co-ordinator.

If you would like a friend or family member to accompany you to the Pre-assessment they would be more than welcome. If you would like an advocate to attend any of your Pre-assessment appointments, please let us know. We will either arrange an advocate for you or put you in touch with a local advocacy service.
Comments and concerns
We welcome your views, feedback and suggestions about how we can improve our service. The PALS office takes calls Monday to Friday, between 9.30am and 4.30pm.

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