

Understanding the Underutilization of Electroconvulsive Therapy in Children and Adolescents

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Abstract : The aim of this work was to understand the reasons behind the underutilization of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) in the younger population and raise possible solutions. We conducted a non-systematic review of literature throughout a search on PubMed, using the terms 'children', 'adolescents' and 'electroconvulsive', 'therapy'. Candidate articles written in languages other than English were excluded. Articles were selected according to title and/or abstract's content relevance, resulting in a total of 5 articles. ECT is a recognized effective treatment in adults for several psychiatric conditions. As in adults, ECT in children and adolescents is proven most beneficial in the treatment of severe mood disorders, catatonia, and, to a lesser extent, schizophrenia. ECT in adults has also been used to treat autism's self-injurious behaviours, Tourette's syndrome and resistant first-episode schizophrenia disorder. Despite growing evidence on its safety and effectiveness in children and adolescents, like those found in adults, ECT remains a controversial and underused treatment in patients this age, even when it is clearly indicated. There are various possible reasons to this; limited awareness among professionals (lack of knowledge and experience among child psychiatrists), stigmatic public opinion (despite positive feedback from patients and families, there is an unfavourable and inaccurate representation in the media, contributing to a negative public opinion), legal restrictions and ethical controversies (restrictive regulations such as a minimum age for administration), lack of randomized trials (the currently available studies are retrospective, with small size samples, and most of the publications are either case reports or case series). This shows the need to raise awareness and knowledge, not only for mental health professionals, but also to the general population, through the media, regarding indications, methods and safety of ECT in order to provide reliable information to the patient and families. Large-scale longitudinal studies are also useful to further demonstrate the efficacy and safety of ECT and can aid in the formulation of algorithms and guidelines as without these changes, the availability of ECT to the younger population will remain restricted by regulations and social stigma. In conclusion, these results highlight that lack of adequate knowledge and accurate information are the most important factors behind the underutilization of ECT in younger population. Mental healthcare professionals occupy a cornerstone position; if data is given by a well-informed healthcare professional instead of the media, general population (including patients and their families) will probably regard the procedure in a more favourable way. So, the starting point should be to improve health care professional's knowledge and experience on this choice of treatment.

Keywords : adolescents, children, electroconvulsive, therapy

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