

Correspondence

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Electroconvulsive therapy effectiveness and harm

Dr Tracy states that there is no reliable and convincing evidence with regard to the effectiveness of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) (forgetting why, remember how), and then continues by saying that ECT critics are '...folk [who] are curiously happy with anecdote when it comes to harms'.¹ Curiously, in the light of the acknowledged uncertainty of the evidence base regarding effectiveness and, I would add, seriousness of adverse effects, Dr Tracy omits to explain the basis upon which proponents of ECT continue to practice this intervention on a relatively large scale (perhaps on anecdote when it comes to 'good' outcome?). But, we do have some evidence through systematic reviews that ECT is not effective beyond the treatment period.^{2,3} There is little or nothing in the literature to suggest that ECT 'saves lives' or that it prevents suicide, as it is often repeated. In fact, a study by ECT advocates found an overall increased rate of suicide in patients treated with ECT.⁴ With regard to other harm done, a large study carried out by ECT-advocate Harold Sackeim revealed highly significant cognitive dysfunctions (memory loss and other impairment of cognitive functioning) in 347 patients tested 6 months after ECT, as well as persistent electro-encephalogram abnormalities, indicating the presence of persistent brain damage.⁵

1 Tracy DK. Highlights of this issue. *Br J Psychiatry* 2019; **214**: A13.

2 Read J, Bentall R. The effectiveness of electroconvulsive therapy: a literature review. *Epidemiol Psychiatr Soc* 2010; **19**: 333–47.

3 UK ECT Review Group. Efficacy and safety of electroconvulsive therapy in depressive disorders: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet* 2003; **361**: 799–808.

- 4 Munk-Olsen T, Laursen TM, Videbech P, Mortensen PB, Rosenberg R. All-cause mortality among recipients of electroconvulsive therapy: register-based cohort study. *Br J Psychiatry* 2007; **190**: 435–9.
- 5 Sackeim HA, Prudic J, Fuller R, Keilp J, Lavori PW, Olfson M. The cognitive effects of electroconvulsive therapy in community settings. *Neuropsychopharmacology* 2007; **32**: 244–54.

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Author's reply

I am grateful to Professor Chiesa for his comments on my Highlights' piece in March's *BJPsych*.¹ It is inevitably a challenge to get as much detail as I would like into a one-page column that endeavours to capture some major points from most of that month's *Journal* content. The primary intent is to encourage the reader to engage with the primary articles mentioned, although of course accuracy and balance are important. Re-reading my column in light of Professor Chiesa's comments, I do not believe that I wrote or inferred that there is 'no reliable and convincing evidence with regard to the effectiveness of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)', although I noted the challenge of the lack of randomised controlled trials – often considered the best form of evidence – and the reasons why this might be the case. Within the remit of the column, I did not, and do not, feel that I was obligated to 'explain the basis upon which proponents of ECT continue to practice this intervention on a relatively large scale', although I recognise that this is a concern of many. I am grateful to Professor Chiesa for his subsequent identification of some specific literature on ECT, some of which I was familiar with, some of which was new to me; the papers reaffirm the ongoing need for more and better research in this field.

1 Tracy DK. Highlights of this issue. *Br J Psychiatry* 2019; **214**: A13.

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