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How to produce normality with electricity

"Classic" methods of treatment aim to change the organism in order to produce a change of mood. This applies to electroshock. Hanfried Helmchen, leader of the university "clinic" in West Berlin, said in 1982 that "The electrical stimulation produces the highest possible activity of all parts of the brain at the same time...."

The control of motion is regulated by the nerve cords from and to the brain; therefore a current passed through the brain becomes noticeable all over the body; this causes the so-called jumping-jack motion.

Psychiatrists have known for a long time that "patients" don't receive electroshock with enthusiasm. In a 1961 article called "A study about the permanent treatment – the point of view of the patients and staff," published in Volume 5 of the journal *Medicina Experimentalis*, three French psychiatrists explained:

"ECT in many cases led to the apprehended persistent disturbance of memory, or to confusions, which were even harder to interpret. ('You've weakened my heart' ... etc.) One of the patients experienced the electroshock treatments, which occurred at regular intervals, as regularly repeated torture. Even when the general condition had sufficiently improved ... the electroshock treatment showed a ... destructive result."

But it is not only the emotional and intellectual damage it does that makes electroshock a "classic" treatment. During autopsies performed in the 1950s, individual case-examinations were done on the brains of "schizophrenics" who had undergone electroshock, and psychiatrists and neurologists often found many different kinds of brain deformation, including softening of whole parts of the brain, destruction of the hippocampus, bleeding and thrombosis at brain vessels, and change of nerve cells at the thalamus, the hippocampus, and the neocortex.

The number of patients who showed hypersensitivity to this kind of treatment (with or without curare), and therefore didn't survive, cannot be counted. The Zurich neurosurgeon Hartwig Heyck, after examining the brain of a "schizophrenic" whose heart couldn't endure a 355th electroshock, came to the conclusion in 1955 that "The result doesn't permit one to presume that electroshock treatment is harmless."

We owe knowledge of how electroshock affects cats to a 1971 study by East German neurologist Helma Sommer: from the third electroshock on she observed in her "patients" an essential change of mind, a shaken sense of direction, which became obvious when the animals quickly fled into the protecting darkness. In addition, she observed a decline of sexual instincts and of appetite. With a growing number of electroshocks, these effects increased, and some months later they apparently caused permanent damage.

In the course of examining the advancing destruction of brain cells after an increasing number of electroshocks, Sommer thought about the exact origin of the brain damage: "It is possible that the repeated effect of the current used causes a gradual blocking of the metabolism between brain cells, by which means the metabolism of the cells is slowed down temporarily. Eventually the irreversible malfunction is inevitable."

Sommer calls this an acute cell disease: "As we can see from our tissue preparations, the destruction of the nerve cell starts with the disintegration or atomization of the Nissl-substance [accumulation of nucleic acid, which, as the fundamental substance of the cells, receives all information about the construction and function of the body organs]. Also, the cell membrane dissolves. The disintegration finally spreads to the cell's nucleus, and the end of the progressive development is that the cell dies."

Former acting sublieutenant Erwin Pape, who underwent this treatment more than 100 times in the 1950s, described in 1972 how the procedure strikes the person concerned:

"Dragged to a rubber mattress, the rubber gag between his teeth; both electrodes, which end with a common wire in an electric box, are attached to his temple by the doctor. Sometimes with a long cry, always accompanied by a heavy gasp, begin the cramps – so violent that they sometimes cause fractures of the jaws, vertebra, thighs or arms. Soon half a dozen unconscious patients lie in their beds, and the others – with horror in their limbs – are glad that it wasn't their turn."

California psychiatrist Leon Epstein was quoted in a 1977 issue of *Psychology Today* as saying that electroshock was "safer than Aspirin." (Indeed, no known incident of electroshock has hurt a psychiatrist.) In 1982, Hanfried Helmchen, in whose "hospital" the electroshock room was insulated against noise, called electroshock treatment "particularly humane."

According to Erwin Pape, it was the second world war, a year after Ugo Cerletti's pioneer work, that brought the triumphant march of electroshock. Pape wrote in 1981: "Raging patients, strong as an ox, who previously had beaten up several nurses and had torn thick leather belts, would suddenly become sleeping 'apostles of peace' [conscientious objectors] ... [and] were all at once cured. And malingerers, who before had remained in the station in spite of large doses of castor oil, quickly learned that it was more agreeable to fight against hostile gunfire than to suffer from electroshock."

According to psychiatrist Detlef Ploog from the Max Planck Institute in Munich, electroshock treatment is often "the only remaining method to normalize the state of mind." Other psychiatrists report the safety and success of the treatment with stubborn soldiers on a warship, where electroshock "therapy" had "turned raging patients into quiet, obedient individuals, who were willing to cooperate. The port authorities ... were astonished to receive a shipload of obedient and controllable patients...."

From *The History of Electroshock*, edited by Leonard Roy Frank

Excerpted from Die Chemische Knebel (The Chemical Gag), *by Peter Lehmann. Translated by Ulrike Stamp, Berlin. To order a copy of* Die Chemische Knebel, *write to Peter Lehmann c/o Irren-offensive, Pallasstrasse 12, 1000 Berlin 30, West Germany.*

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