

Use of ECT treatment remains steady, according to Mental Health Commission

Wednesday, December 30th: There were 395 programmes of Electro-convulsive therapy (ECT), comprising 3,124 individual treatments, administered to 286 residents in Ireland during 2019, according to a report published by the Mental Health Commission today. This represents a modest increase when compared to 2018, which saw 365 programmes of ECT, comprising 2,936 individual treatments, administered to 283 residents.

A programme of ECT refers to no more than 12 treatments of ECT prescribed by a consultant psychiatrist, with the total number of treatments administered in a programme of ECT varying from one to 12 treatments. The report shows that the majority of residents were administered one programme of ECT (72.7% in 2019 and 74.3% in 2018). In 2019, 15.7% of residents were administered two programmes of ECT, followed by 11.5% being administered three or more programmes. In 2018, 18.6% of residents were administered two programmes of ECT, followed by 7.1% being administered three or more programmes.

Depressive disorders were reported as a diagnosis for 77% of residents who were administered ECT in 2019, with the same diagnosis accounting for 63% in 2018. Refractory (resistance) to medication was the most common single indication for ECT, accounting for 66% of programmes (259) in 2019, and 67% (244) in 2018. Improvement was reported as the outcome in 76% of programmes of ECT (299) in 2019, and 81% in 2018 (294).

“This report shows that the provision of ECT has remained steady during 2019,” said the Chief Executive of the Mental Health Commission, John Farrelly. “I think it is important to recognise that there is a stigma around ECT and that is something which I think needs to be addressed through open discussion and greater understanding. While it is not for everyone, this report shows that ECT works for most people, and it has helped many Irish people see improvements in mental health.”

The report, ‘The Administration of Electro-convulsive Therapy in Approved Centres: Activity Report 2019’, provides information on how often ECT is used, the people who receive it, the services providing it, and the quality and safety of the service. It is the tenth annual activity report published on the use of ECT in approved centres and reports on 2019 data and previously published 2017 and 2018 data for comparative purposes.

During 2019, residents receiving ECT ranged in age from 22 to 89 years of age and the average age of all residents who were administered ECT was 59 years of age. This is in line with the findings of the 2018 activity report. In both 2018 and 2019, more females than males received ECT, at a ratio of approximately two-thirds to one-third. In the case of both years, the higher ratio of female to male ECT recipients may be reflective of the relatively higher incidence of depressive illness in women as compared with men.

The majority of programmes of ECT were administered to residents who were admitted on a voluntary basis when they commenced their programme of ECT, accounting for 82% of programmes in 2019, and 78% in 2018.

In 2019, 84% of ECT treatments (2,621) were administered with consent, and 16% (516) were administered without consent. This compares to 82% and 18% of respectively during 2018.

2019 key statistics on ECT

- **395** programmes of ECT were administered to **286 residents** in 2019 (2018: **365** programmes to **283** residents)
- Rate of ECT programmes per resident was **1.4 programmes per resident** in 2019 (2018: 1.3)
- **73%** of residents who received ECT were administered one programme of ECT (2018: 74%)
- A programme of ECT may involve up to 12 individual treatments of ECT. The average number of treatments per programme was **7.9** in 2019, as compared with **8** in 2018.
- There was a total of **3,124** individual treatments of ECT administered in 2019 (2018: **2,936**).

The Mental Health Commission is in the process of rolling out its Comprehensive Information System (CIS) ECT function, which was initially piloted with two services, St Patrick's University Hospital and the Acute Psychiatric Unit, Tallaght University Hospital. The implementation of the CIS ECT function alters the obligation on approved centres from providing an annual data return of all programmes of ECT, to a data entry contemporaneous with each ECT treatment. For future ECT activity reports, annual data returns will no longer be required from approved centres.

Ends

Notes to the editor:

About the Mental Health Commission

The Mental Health Commission is an independent statutory body. The primary functions of the Mental Health Commission are to foster and promote high standards of care and good practice in the delivery of mental health services and to ensure that the interests of those involuntarily admitted are protected, pursuant to the Mental Health Act 2001. The Mental Health Commission also has statutory responsibility for the Decision Support Service under the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015.

What is Electro-convulsive therapy (ECT)?

Electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) is a medical procedure in which an electric current is passed briefly through the brain via electrodes applied to the scalp to induce generalised seizure activity. The person receiving treatment is placed under general anaesthetic and muscle relaxants are given to prevent body spasms. Its purpose is to treat specific types of major mental illnesses.

Treatments v Programmes of ECT

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Depressive Disorder

Depressive disorders are mental illnesses characterised by a persistently depressed mood and long-term loss of pleasure or interest in life, often with other symptoms such as disturbed sleep, feelings of guilt or inadequacy, and suicidal thoughts.