

Involuntary mental health patient given twice-weekly shock treatments

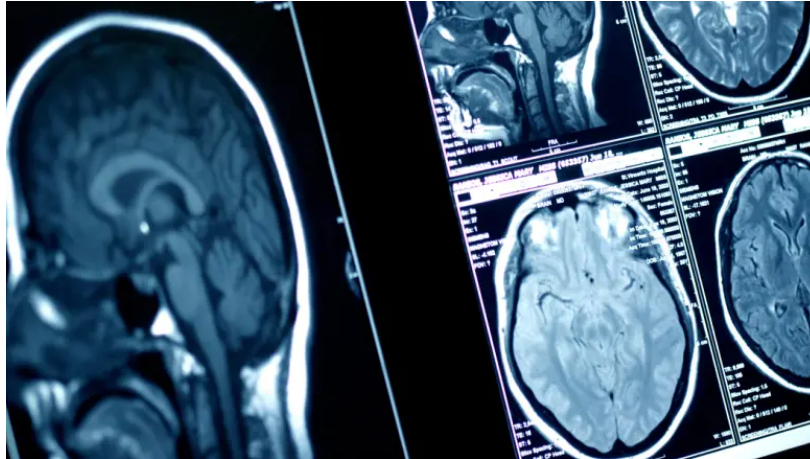
By Felicity Caldwell

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An involuntary mental health patient was given more than 140 shock therapy treatments over more than two years before his case was escalated to the Supreme Court.

The details were revealed in the Public Advocate's latest annual report.



There were 568 applications for ECT approved for people without the capacity to give informed consent in 2017-18. FAIRFAX MEDIA/JESSICA SHAPIRO

Public Advocate Mary Burgess said a sizeable share of her time, and the resources of her small office were involved in legal interventions in the case of the mental health patient who was detained in a mental health service.

Ms Burgess said the patient came to her attention in July 2016, when she became aware of an application for guardianship for the man.

"Ten months before, he was placed on an eight-month regime of seclusion and twice weekly electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)," she said.

Ms Burgess said she became increasingly concerned about the long period of seclusion, the number and frequency of ECT treatments being administered to the patient and its impact on his cognitive function.

"Large numbers of ECT treatments can cause harm to patients," she said.

In March 2018, the Public Advocate initiated a judicial review application to the Supreme Court to review the ECT certificate issued by psychiatrists to administer the treatment to the patient.

The Supreme Court issued an interim order for the treating team to refrain from administering more ECT to the patient without informing the Public Guardian, and the matter was resolved by consent.

The Public Advocate is making inquiries with the Chief Psychiatrist about patients in the involuntary mental health system who have received a large number of ECT treatments.

Ms Burgess said specific limits should be set on the number of ECT treatments that could be administered to a patient over their lifetime until treatment risks were clarified.

Guidelines from NSW note that continuation or maintenance of ECT was demonstrated to cause deficits in learning and frontal function and recommended regular cognitive assessments.

Ms Burgess said she had sought leave to intervene in proceedings in the Mental Health Review Tribunal this year, particularly about applications for approval to administer ECT due to "significant concerns" about the way proceedings were being conducted in the tribunal.

But she was unable to comment further because of confidentiality provisions in the Mental Health Act.

There were 568 applications for ECT approved for people without the capacity to give informed consent in 2017-18, according to the Mental Health Tribunal's annual report.

ECT involves passing an electric current through the brain, which affects brain activity and aims to relieve severe depression and psychotic symptoms.

Meanwhile, Ms Burgess said the rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme in Queensland was "significantly slower" than initial predictions.

As at June 30, there were 16,524 Queensland NDIS participants, representing only 59 per cent of the predicted number to enter the scheme in 2017-18.

"This slow uptake is likely to place substantial pressure on the scheme, in terms of supporting Queenslanders to have an NDIS plan in place before the end of the rollout period at the end of June 2019," Ms Burgess said.

"The scheme will now need to plan and approve the participation of almost 75,000 Queenslanders in the last year of the rollout."



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