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Mental Health Tribunal report shows 560 applications for ECT in one year

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Electroconvulsive therapy has been approved for more than 500 patients in Queensland in the past year. Photo: Darren West

More than 500 applications for electroconvulsive therapy were approved for people without the capacity to give informed consent in the past year.

The Mental Health Review Tribunal, which makes and reviews orders and hears appeals about the treatment of people with a mental illness, approved 560 applications for ECT in 2015-16, up only one case on the previous year.

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

Beyondblue says modern-day ECT is safe and effective, but it is an intrusive procedure and can cause some memory problems so should be used only when absolutely necessary.

The tribunal's latest annual report says the decision to approve ECT requires proof that the person does not have the capacity to give informed consent to the treatment.

"And that the treatment is the most appropriate treatment in the circumstances, having regard to the person's clinical condition and treatment history," it reads.

There were 30 applications for ECT refused and 58 withdrawn.

Worryingly, the tribunal receives up to 40 "return to sender" hearing notification letters per week.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that was due to the mobility of the patient population, reluctance by some patients to open "official letters from the government", and homelessness.

But when patients attended their own hearing, there was a 10 times great revocation rate, supporting the importance of people being notified.

"The tribunal makes every attempt at the hearing to determine that the patient knows of their hearing and has the information in the clinical report provided to them," the annual report reads.

There were three applications to perform psychosurgery, or neurosurgical treatment for mental disorder, a category that in previous decades included a more crude technique known as a lobotomy.

The report said psychosurgery applications were heard by a panel which included specialists from the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists and the Royal Australian College of surgeons.

"The emerging interest of non-ablative neurosurgical techniques, especially in relation to the well-researched area of movement disorders, has led to this occurrence," the report reads.

"Significant research has determined that deep brain stimulation (DBS) for obsessive compulsive disorders is a valuable treatment option, if other treatment options prove unsuitable or no longer offer sustained relief from symptoms.

"The tribunal expects this area to develop as an area of applications as medical knowledge and research proceeds."

The new Mental Health Act, to come into effect in March, says non-ablative neurosurgical procedures can only be approved if the applicant has given informed consent.

The tribunal also heard 10,456 involuntary treatment order reviews.

Community Legal Centres Queensland director James Farrell said previous reports showed a low rate of representative and support for people appearing before the tribunal.

"Changes to the Mental Health Act that come in this year will ensure that patients are provided with greater support including legal representation which means they'll be able to engage in the process more fully and will likely lead to better outcomes," Mr Farrell said.

"Consequences for patients under the Mental Health Act can be really severe... so making sure that people understand their rights and are able to be properly represented is important to make sure the most suitable treatment is made available."

Mr Farrell said the appeals process could be difficult to navigate, particularly for people with mental health issues, so the new Act should result in better outcomes.

"Many of the people we see through this process don't have the support of family or other supports in the community," he said.

Tribunal president Barry Thomas said he had met with representatives of the Bar Association, Law Society, Justice Department and other organisations to progress a scheme for no cost legal representation of patients at hearings, in preparation for the new Act coming into effect.

The tribunal received 1497 more applications in 2015-16, resulting in an extra 805

hearings - 140 more sitting days - more than in any previous year.

It completed 12,948 hearings, representing 13,106 matters, over the financial year.

The story [Mental Health Tribunal report shows 560 applications for ECT in one year](http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/mental-health-tribunal-report-shows-560-applications-for-ect-in-one-year-20170105-gtmdb.html) (<http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/mental-health-tribunal-report-shows-560-applications-for-ect-in-one-year-20170105-gtmdb.html>) first appeared on [Brisbane Times](http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/) (<http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/>).