

Review of

Linda Andre: Doctors of Deception: What They Don't Want You to Know About Shock

Hard cover, XI + 361 pages, ISBN 978-0-8135-4441-0

Piscataway, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press 2009, € 20.99

Linda Andre is an electroshock survivor who has spent the past 30 years recovering from her experiences with ECT. Her book is fascinating, essential and unique in many ways. Published more than three decades after Leonard Roy Frank's *The History of Shock Treatment*, it is the first book in the English language written by a shock survivor to include the voices and perspectives of survivors. It considers shock (also called electroconvulsive treatment, or ECT) from multiple perspectives: medical, scientific, legal, social, moral. It is thoroughly researched, painstakingly documented, and its overall level of scholarship—in particular its reliance on primary rather than secondary sources—is superior to that of any existing book by professionals (who are users and promoters of this form of legitimized abuse).

In focusing on the collective history of the ordinary people—mostly women—who have undergone electroshock, rather than the proclamations of the men who have made careers out of administering and promoting it, the book reframes traditional notions of what history is and who gets to make it. The author doesn't place herself outside of history as a supposedly objective observer, but tells us she writes from her firsthand experience as a maker of this history. The result is a book that is compelling in its immediacy and reads at times like a detective novel.

In the first chapter the author tells of her own devastating experience with shock in spare but moving prose. She calls the erasure of five years of her life “a terrible secret, impossible to tell,” and at the same time makes us understand what it's like. In the following chapters she gracefully connects up her own experiences of discrimination and stigma as a mental patient with the attitudes and practices of the fascistic era when shock was invented, showing us that they are not very different.

She then leads us through the history of shock from the 1970s to the present. In the early decades of shock, doctors routinely acknowledged that the procedure was brain damaging, since brain damage was considered acceptable for mental patients. But by the 1970s, changing laws and attitudes led to what psychiatrists perceived as a “crisis in ECT.” The book focuses on the past 35 years, and its central thesis is that this is the “public relations era” when the shock industry made a decision to employ public relations tactics to sell ECT, rather than science to investigate it. The author then goes on to deconstruct the “public relations script” of claims made for shock, showing that it is entirely false and yet at the same time one of the most successful public relations campaigns ever. Tying in the themes of her earlier chapters, she shows how hatred of mental patients has been skilfully employed to silence survivors of shock who have tried to warn of its brain-damaging effects.

Along the way Linda Andre shows us why research on ECT cannot be trusted, nor can media coverage. Three chapters tell the compelling story of how survivors of ECT fought organized medicine for three decades to try to implement truthful informed consent—in which patients were fully and truthfully informed of ECT's risks—to no avail.

The reader is drawn to the conclusion reached by the author, which follows logically from the evidence of seven decades presented in her book: only a ban on shock can protect patients from serious and permanent brain damage.

This book should be required reading for judges, lawyers, relatives, patients and clinicians and, because of its readability, style, and even at times wit, will interest general readers as well. This makes sense, in particular for European readers, after the European Council accepted in 2004 the “Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states to ensure the protection of the human rights and dignity of people suffering from mental disorder, especially those placed as involuntary patients,” which calls forced electroshock administration ethical. The current scandal involving the continued use of forced shock in a society which defines itself as humane shows us how up to date Linda Andre's book is. But be warned: readers may never accept a statement from an authority figure at face value again, no matter how progressive he calls himself and how safe he calls this brutal and primitive psychiatric method.

Peter Lehmann