

# What can be done to overcome the stigma of ECT?

## Dr. Gazdag:

Let's start with the negative image of ECT. With my colleagues, we have conducted a number of attitude studies in Hungary and found that even psychiatrists' attitudes are rather negative towards ECT. Some of the respondents thought that ECT is an obsolete treatment that should be banned. Our latest study that surveyed laypeople's attitudes found that the majority of respondents were not aware of what ECT is and what it is used for.

In light of these results, the image of ECT among professionals can be improved with better education. In one of our studies, we surveyed the impact of witnessing a real ECT on attitudes of medical students, and we have detected a significant improvement of the attitudes in most of the students. Probably the Head of the Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy at Semmelweis University was also aware of these results because starting this year, all six-year medical students have to see a real ECT during their clinical practice, and hopefully we can improve their attitudes in this way.

Regarding the means of improving public attitudes, distributing evidence-based scientific information can be an important way for improving ECT's image. The way ECT is presented in the media is also an important factor. Miloš Forman's iconic film, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, while it's an excellent artwork, painted a horrible image about ECT, and thus determined public attitudes for decades. Fortunately, the young generation is less aware of it and thus less influenced by this film. Pascal Sienaert, a colleague of mine from Belgium, systematically studied the media portrait of ECT and found a slow shift towards a more realistic presentation in the last few years.

Another important factor is how public attitudes can be influenced. One of the main aims of the European Forum for ECT, where I am a member of the board, is improving the image of ECT. For professionals, we annually organize scientific meetings to spread up-to-date knowledge about ECT.

Surely that's the best way — to follow a patient's ECT treatment and see how effective ECT is and how nicely the patient recovers after ECT. That's the best way to convince the professionals or laypeople that it's really an effective treatment and not a torture.