

What is ECT?

Alyssa Phillips:

Tell us what ECT is, what conditions it's used for, and how effective it is.

Dr. Fink:

In 1934, a physician treated a number of psychiatric patients. In history, looking back at his records, they were all catatonic. He treated some catatonic patients with a chemical to produce a seizure, and he got very excited. And in 1936, he presented this at a Swiss psychiatric meeting, a medical meeting, and there were numerous people who came from all over the world. There were representatives from different parts, different countries, and one of them was Italy.

An Italian by the name of Lucio Bini went home to Rome, and his mentor had done a thesis on producing seizures in dogs using electricity. And so these two Italians treated a patient who was manic and very excited. He had been brought to the hospital by the police and was uncontrollable. He had to be restrained. And they gave him a seizure, and he woke up, and he was somewhat better. They treated him a few times, and he recovered and went home, and that was the beginning of electroconvulsive therapy.

But the treatment is the induction of a seizure. It is not the electricity. There are many physicians who consider electricity the treatment part, but I think they are wrong. There is nothing in the electricity which helps the patient. What helps the patient is having grand mal seizures done over a number of days.

There is another drug now that I have brought back. In the 1960s, I treated a number of patients with fluorothyl. This produces a seizure without the electricity problem. And I think at this point, given an opportunity, fluorothyl seizures should be reintroduced, and they will be effective for catatonia as well as for other conditions.

Alyssa Phillips:

What is one of the most remarkable recoveries you've seen from ECT?

Dr. Fink:

The ECT recovery is remarkable in the sense that a patient may be psychotic, manic, delirious, depressed, any of those symptoms, or catatonic. And three to six to 10 treatments changes the conditions markedly. And if the patient is treated over a six-month period by continuation ECT, they recover. You ask whether I've seen remarkable cases. I've seen many.