

Lake Alice Inquiry Leaves Doubts

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The finding of the one-man commission of inquiry that the authorities at Lake Alice Hospital adolescent unit were justified in giving electric shock treatment to a 13-year-old Niuean boy raises several important questions.

Mr W. J. Mitchell, the magistrate who conducted the inquiry, says he "was not persuaded that the treatment was administered in such a way as to cause unnecessary suffering, physical or mental."

The question this leaves unanswered is the degree of

suffering, whether necessary or unnecessary, caused by administering electro-convulsive therapy without the normal anaesthetic.

Mr Mitchell's finding that there was instant loss of consciousness is not entirely consistent with the statements made by children who were interviewed by the Herald at the Lake Alice adolescent unit last year.

All the children questioned by the Herald disliked and feared ECT—especially when it was given without anaesthetic.

One boy, asked to describe how it felt when he was given ECT for the first time, said it was "like being hit

on the head with a sledgehammer."

Children who had been given ECT claimed that its unpleasant after-effects included severe headaches and loss of memory.

Although there was agreement that loss of consciousness immediately followed the initial shock, there was also undisputed evidence that children who resisted having the electric shock treatment were forcibly held down by nurses or orderlies while the electrodes were placed on their temples.

Dr S. R. Leeks, the psychiatrist in charge of the unit, said when questioned

by the Herald that this occasionally happened.

Asked what happened if children resisted having ECT, he said: "If there is a struggle, there is a struggle. This happens very occasionally. Kids, by and large, once they know they are going to get it, do not resist. If someone does not want to have it you need a hell of a lot of people in to give it to them."

Mr Mitchell states in his report that administering electro-convulsive therapy to the Niuean boy was called for because he was suffering from "acute psychotic depression."

Acute depression in which

the patient contemplates suicide is regarded by psychiatrists as the classical indication for ECT.

In the case of the Niuean boy, however, a letter sent by Dr Leeks to the director of the Social Welfare Department in Auckland a month after the boy's admission to the Lake Alice unit spoke of the boy behaving "like an uncontrollable animal" and being given ECT "because of his apparently psychotic behaviour."

A copy of this letter is in the Herald's possession.

The Herald has been given copies of other case histories from the Lake Alice adolescent unit in which ECT was

administered for reasons far removed from acute depression.

One 15-year-old boy officially described as suffering from autism and moderate mental retardation is recorded as having been given six ECT treatments—the first two of them on a single day without anaesthetic.

The case notes state that his behaviour was "at first markedly aggressive" and that the ECT was used to control this behaviour. The boy was also stated to have irritated other people by "his desire to hold hands."

• Details of the inquiry are on page 3 of this section.

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