

Report on Austin City Council Public Health and Human Services  
Subcommittee Hearing on Psychiatric Electroshock in Austin  
(May 15, 2007)

The Austin City Council Public Health and Human Services subcommittee held a follow-up hearing on electroshock in Austin, subsequent to the CAEST (Coalition for the Abolition of Electroshock in Texas) presentation on April 3<sup>rd</sup> (<http://www.endofshock.com/Report%20on%204-3-07%20Austin%20City%20Council%20Hearing%20on%20Electroshock%20in%20Austin.doc>).

It was coincidental and highly ironic that the agenda item just prior to electroshock was a presentation by a group of Akins High School students on prescription drug abuse. They laid out some of the effects of these widely prescribed psychotropic drugs, a number of which are the symptoms for which electroshock is indicated. The incongruities and machinations necessary to acknowledge these students and the dangers they point out, while at the same time supporting the beliefs and practices of biological psychiatry are incredible.

Regarding electroshock, a mental health system administrator briefly stated his opinion that electroshock was a good thing and helped people that he knew. One shock survivor spoke and said ECT helped him greatly 30 years ago after being diagnosed as “mentally ill” and given the neuroleptic Thorazine. The director of Austin/Travis County Mental Health and Mental Retardation (MHMR) defended electroshock, while pointing out that it is not practiced in his agency. He introduced his top psychiatrist, Dr. James Van Norman, who told the councilmembers that ECT was very safe and highly effective, that the research showed that while drugs had about a 60% efficacy rate for serious depression, ECT did even better, about 70%. These speakers advised the council not to ban ECT.

Several members of our Coalition were present, including shock survivor activists Jim Franklin, Don Erickson and Evelyn Scogin. A few of us had signed up for our 3-minute citizens communication, and were able to speak after the MHMR men. Evelyn’s sister, Kathy Scogin, spoke first, and was clear and strong in her description of her sister’s plunge into disability at the hands of psychiatry and the damaging effects of electroshock. Kathy laid out the reality of what she called her sister’s “misinformed consent.”

John Breeding then spoke on behalf of the Coalition for the Abolition of Electroshock in Texas. He reminded the Council that the Coalition had not asked for a ban, but for three other possible actions: an ordinance against contractual arrangements with facilities that used electroshock, a resolution statement on ECT, and a full public hearing on electroshock. He referred to the data supplied previously to the councilmembers, and emphasized that electroshock was brain-damaging and lacked efficacy. Breeding also followed up on the April meeting by presenting the councilmembers with a packet of information containing the original documents, together with relevant press coverage, of the 1982 Berkeley ban on electroshock and the 1991 San Francisco resolution statement on shock. At that time, Councilmember Martinez told us that he had investigated the three healthcare insurance supports available for City of Austin employees, and that none of the three provided insurance coverage for electroshock. Breeding thanked him for that.

Lee Spiller, Texas Citizens Commission on Human Rights (CCHR) Director, followed up on the CAEST request that city hospitals, Seton Shoal Creek in particular, adopt a genuine medical wellness program as an alternative to electroshock. Lee gave the members a recent USA Today article ([http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2007-05-03-mental-illness\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2007-05-03-mental-illness_N.htm)) showing that “mentally ill” people died, on average, 25 years younger than the general population. He also gave some examples of medical problems that cause psychiatric symptoms.

Sumner Erickson then testified on behalf of his famous musician brother, Roky Erickson, a shock survivor and Coalition member (<http://www.endofshock.com/ice%20cream%20social.htm>). He spoke about Roky’s full emergence from psychiatric labels, drugs and electroshock. He pointedly told the council that Dr. Van Norman’s praise of electroshock as even better than drugs was, in his mind, not much of a commendation. Speaking from the heart, Sumner told the Council that Roky’s recovery was all about love, support, and physical and psychological wellness.

Evelyn Scogin spoke last, and once again made a strong statement. She challenged earlier assertions by one of the men defending ECT that informed consent was in place. She pointed out that while she apparently signed consent for each of the 31 electroshocks she received, she was heavily drugged at the time, and actually remembers none of them. She asked, “Is that consent?” Evelyn does not mince words. She ended with a quote of psychiatrist Thomas Szasz from Leonard Roy Frank’s *History of Shock Treatment*: “the prime purpose of psychiatric treatments—whether utilizing drugs, electricity, surgery, or confinement, especially if imposed on nonconsenting clients—is to authenticate the subject as a ‘patient,’ the psychiatrist as a ‘doctor,’ and the intervention as a form of ‘treatment.’”

Fittingly, Don Erickson who has played the most significant role in our City Council campaign, spoke last. Don once again told the council about his failed treatment with psychiatric drugs, and the failed promise from Seton Shoal Creek that ECT would help and that he would be able to get off the psychiatric drugs. He reiterated his conclusion that he had been “scammed.”

Regrettably, we were not able to convince any of the three subcommittee members that electroshock in Austin was a public health issue that deserved further Council at this time. Members Dunkerley and Leffingwell both expressed an opinion almost identical to the response the Coalition received from Seton Shoal Creek medical director Paul Whitelock on February 15, 2006 (<http://www.endofshock.com/2-15-06%20meeting%20with%20Dr.%20Paul%20Whitelock.doc>)--that based on what they had heard from MHMR and Seton representatives, ECT was a necessary tool in the psychiatric treatment toolbox.

Breeding informed the Councilmembers that the Coalition would continue to make its case against electroshock in the community, and at Seton Shoal Creek in particular, and would not stop until Seton discontinued electroshocking people. .

