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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Pattern of electroconvulsive therapy use in Spain: Proposals for an optimal practice and equitable access[☆]



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Abstract

Objectives: The main aims of our study were to estimate the current rates and pattern of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) use in Spain, as well as exploring the causes that may be limiting its use in our country.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey was conducted covering every psychiatric unit in Spain as of 31 December 2012.

Results: More than half (54.9%) of the psychiatric units applied ECT at a rate of 0.66 patients per 10,000 inhabitants. There are wide variations with regard to ECT application rates between the different autonomous communities (0.00–1.39) and provinces (0.00–3.90). ECT was prescribed to a mean of 25.5 patients per hospital that used the technique and 4.5 in referral centre ($P = .000$), but wide differences were reported in the number of patients who were prescribed ECT from hospital to hospital.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Terapia electroconvulsiva;
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Conclusions: Although the percentage of psychiatric units applying ECT in our country is among the highest in the world, the ECT application rate in Spain is among the lowest within western countries. Large differences in ECT use have been reported across the various autonomous communities, provinces and hospitals. Thus, health planning strategies need to be implemented, as well as promoting training in ECT among health professionals, if these differences in ECT use are to be reduced.

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Patrón de uso de la terapia electroconvulsiva en España: propuestas para una práctica óptima y un acceso equitativo

Resumen

Objetivos: Analizar en términos cuantitativos y cualitativos la situación del uso de la terapia electroconvulsiva (TEC) en España en la actualidad, así como explorar aquellos aspectos que pudieran condicionar su utilización.

Metodología: Encuesta transversal en todas las unidades psiquiátricas existentes en España a fecha 31/12/2012.

Resultados: El 54,9% de las unidades estudiadas aplicaban TEC, resultando en una tasa de aplicación de 0,66 por 10.000 habitantes. Existen amplias variaciones en las tasas de aplicación entre comunidades autónomas (0,00-1,39) y provincias (0,00-3,90). La TEC se indicó en el período estudiado a una media de 25,5 pacientes en los centros que disponían de la técnica, y a 4,5 en los centros que remitían a otros para aplicarla ($p=0,000$), pero con amplias diferencias entre centros.

Conclusiones: El número de centros que disponen de TEC en España es uno de los más elevados entre los países occidentales, pero la tasa de aplicación de esta técnica continúa siendo una de las más bajas, existiendo además marcadas diferencias entre las distintas comunidades autónomas, e incluso entre provincias y centros hospitalarios de una misma comunidad autónoma. Parece preciso implementar estrategias de planificación sanitaria y de formación para reducir la heterogeneidad observada en la prescripción y aplicación de la TEC en España.

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Introduction

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is one of the psychiatric treatments with the highest rates of efficacy and safety in the treatment of some severe mental disorders. In spite of this, there is a high degree of variability in usage of this technique. Worldwide the rate of use varies from 0.04 patients per 10,000 inhabitants-year in Latvia to 5.10 in the United States, with an average of 2.34 patients per 10,000 inhabitants-year.¹ In Europe usage rates stand at more than 3 patients per 10,000 inhabitants-year in Belgium,^{2,3} the United Kingdom^{4,5} or the Scandinavian countries,^{6,7} although the rate is lower than 0.5 in Germany⁸ and many East European countries.⁹⁻¹² Moreover, the use of ECT is prohibited in Slovenia and it is practically extinct in Italy.¹³

Variations in the use of ECT are not restricted to geographically distant countries with very different social and healthcare situations. Thus for example, in the United States Hermann et al.¹⁴ warned of the existence of enormous differences between different healthcare regions, as rates of ECT usage vary from 0.4 to 81.2 patients per 10,000 inhabitants-year, while in Europe wide variations have been reported, not only between neighbouring countries^{15,16} but also between different regions in the same country, as is the

case in England,⁵ Norway¹⁷ or Belgium.² Glen and Scott¹⁸ have reported variations of almost 20 times in the rates of ECT use among the different psychiatric teams in a single hospital in Edinburgh. Data on how its use has changed over time are not conclusive.^{1,4,7,19-28}

Worldwide fewer than 50% of psychiatric centres on average have ECT. In the United States the percentage of centres which use ECT would vary from 6% in California²¹ to 55% in the metropolitan area of New York,²⁹ while in Europe ECT is used in 21.5% of hospitals in Belgium,² 51% in France,³⁰ 59% in Germany,⁸ 72% in Norway¹⁷ and 100% in Denmark.⁷ The reasons for this enormous degree of variability are highly diverse.^{1,31,32}

Based on these data the warning was given that ECT may be under-used in certain countries and regions, so that some patients would have no access to the best therapeutic options for certain diagnostic indications.^{1,19} There seems to be no basis for fear of over-using ECT, as using it habitually is ruled out for indications other than those set in the United States.¹⁴

The first epidemiological survey on the use of ECT in Spain was published in 1978 by Barcia-Salorio and Martínez-Pardo.³³ Bernardo et al.³⁴ in 1990 and Castel et al.³⁵ in 2000 undertook clinical-epidemiological studies on the use

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