

## **Abuse of Electroshock Found in Turkish Mental Hospitals**

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By **CRAIG S. SMITH**

PARIS, Sept. 28- [Turkey's](#) psychiatric hospitals are riddled with horrific abuses, including the use of raw electroshock as a form of punishment, according to a human rights report issued in Istanbul on Wednesday, just days before Turkey begins formal talks to join the European Union.

The report, by Mental Disability Rights International, a Washington-based group, came after several visits in the past year by the group's investigators to psychiatric hospitals and other facilities for people with developmental or mental disabilities.

While the report details many types of abuses, it said the most disturbing involved the use of electroconvulsive therapy without anesthesia to treat a wide range of illnesses in adults and children. The World Health Organization has called for a ban on "unmodified" or "direct" use of the treatment and states that children should never be subjected to it in any form.

The therapy, in which an electrical current is passed through the brain, was developed in the 1930's and continues to be used in mainstream psychiatry to treat a limited number of ailments. But it is normally administered with anesthesia and muscle relaxants.

Without them it can be painful, terrifying and dangerous. Patients can break jaws or crack vertebrae during the induced seizures. The report quotes a 28-year-old patient at Bakirkoy Psychiatric Hospital in Istanbul as saying, "I felt like dying."

The Health Ministry, which is responsible for psychiatric hospitals, said it had not yet read the report and declined to comment, other than to say that the director of the electroconvulsive therapy center at Bakirkoy denied administering unmodified electroshocks there.

But on one day in April when the rights group's staff visited the center, 24 people received such treatments, the report said. Technicians at the center told the group that only patients who had broken bones, presumably from previous treatments, were given anesthesia.

The human rights group estimated that unmodified shock treatment was used on nearly a third of patients undergoing psychiatric crises at the government-run hospitals, including children as young as 9. The treatment is also administered for many illnesses, like postpartum depression, that are not generally considered by the international psychiatric community to warrant electroshock.

The investigators also found that the treatment was used as punishment. The report describes patients being dragged to electroshock therapy in straitjackets and forcibly held down during the procedure.

"If we use anesthesia the E.C.T. won't be as effective, because they won't feel punished," the report quotes the director of the electroconvulsive therapy center as saying.

Referring to that statement, Eric Rosenthal, the founder of the rights group, said in a telephone interview from Istanbul, "That was one of most horrifying statements I've ever heard in 12 years of doing this work."

Turkey has been criticized for using unmodified electroshock before. In 1997 the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture called on Turkey to stop the practice, and the Health Ministry promised to do so.

Now, the new report is likely to complicate Turkey's talks with the European Union, because of the organization's strict human rights requirements for membership.

"There's no question that what's described in the report counts as torture under the European convention and shouldn't exist in Turkey or anywhere in Europe," said Richard Howitt, a British member of the European Parliament who sits on the joint European Union-Turkish parliamentary committee.

He said he would bring up the report as part of the membership negotiations, because to join, a nation must be judged to follow democratic principles, respect human rights and be on its way to meeting certain economic and institutional standards.

The report, which includes testimony from former patients and videos taken inside some institutions, reported other abuses as well.

Much of the documented abuse took place in orphanages and rehabilitation centers for children with developmental or intellectual disabilities. Investigators saw emaciated and neglected children, many of whom had behavioral problems that were likely to have been the result of mistreatment rather than pre-existing illness, Mr. Rosenthal said.

"We saw children who were essentially abandoned, starving, tied down to their beds," he said, adding that investigators had not been allowed to see the worst wards.

Photographs and videos taken at the Saray Rehabilitation Center, the largest of Turkey's government-run rehabilitation centers, show skeletal children, some with plastic water bottles taped over their hands to prevent them from biting their fingers. Other children with only minor disabilities are mixed in with the rest.

Although the center keeps no mortality records, a footnote in the report notes that the large number of admissions without a corresponding number of discharges suggests that many children die at the center.

"We believe there's a very high death rate in these facilities," Mr. Rosenthal said.

Officials at Turkey's Directorate for Social Services and Child Protection could not be reached for comment.

The report said that there were no enforceable laws in Turkey to protect mentally ill people from arbitrary detention or forced treatment and that there were virtually no community services that might keep them out of institutions. As a result, according to the report, thousands are institutionalized for life.

Mr. Rosenthal founded Mental Disability Rights International in 1993. It now has a staff of nine people, including one in Turkey.

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