Definition

“Deep Sleep Therapy” (also referred to as continuous narcosis or deep sedation therapy) is the term used for a procedure in which a patient is maintained (for a period of at least several days) in a comatose or semi comatose state with sedative and other psychotic drugs. The term “deep sleep” is in fact a misnomer; as such a state is not normal sleep.

Evidence

Deep Sleep Therapy was notoriously practised between 1962 and 1979 in Sydney, Australia, at the Chelmsford Private Hospital during which it was anticipated that patients’ minds would be able to overcome mental afflictions. Deep Sleep Therapy was prescribed for various conditions ranging from schizophrenia, anxiety and depression to obesity and addition. This involved periods of induced coma, often for several weeks, caused by the intermittent administration of intravenous barbiturates. Many patients either died during the sleep or awoke from it with varying degrees of impairment, ranging from permanent amnesia to chronic panic. At least twenty-four patients died and many others suffered permanent physical and psychological damage at the hospital during that period. The hospital was forced to close in the early 1980s and the Chelmsford Royal Commission was established in the 1990s to investigate the deaths that occurred there.

Recommendations

Intermittent administration of intravenous barbiturates has no place in the treatment of psychiatric illnesses for the following reasons:

- It has not been demonstrated to be effective in any psychiatric condition, and its administration poses particular hazards.
- The morbidity and mortality rates associated with the practice were unacceptably high.

References


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