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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE NEUROLOGICAL DEVICES PANEL OF THE MEDICAL DEVICES ADVISORY COMMITTEE

FDA, HHS

by

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I have been waiting 50 years to give this testimony before those of you who have the power to make a humane difference.

When I was 19 years old, I became sad and lonely and tried to kill myself. I swallowed one-half bottle of Aspirin. My parents took me to the Massachusetts General Hospital, and thus began my three-year hellish odyssey as a prisoner in the horrors of the mental health system.

I was transferred to Baldpate Hospital, diagnosed with schizophrenia and given 50 shock "treatments" against my will - 40 insulin comas and 10 superimposed electroshocks. Very early on the dark winter mornings of 1961, three other teenaged girls and I were awakened, dressed in johnnys, and told to lie flat on our beds which were lined up right next to each other. We were then injected with insulin, and on ten of those mornings a dark-suited man would walk through the door. He carried all his equipment in a small black suitcase in one hand, this man of death and destruction. He set up his machine behind our heads, one by one. We were curled up beneath our sheets, as though seeking womb-like protection, when they peeled the sheets off of us, forcing us onto our backs, bare and open and vulnerable. I was second in the line-up. Before being turned, I would often peek out from a small, secret opening in my sheet to

see what they were doing to Susan, the first to receive the treatment. I would make myself watch as if it might prepare me in some way. And when she would shake violently all over, I could no longer watch. I would shiver beneath my sheet in fear. And then they would come to me. I can still feel the sticky, cold jelly they put on my temples. My arms and legs were held down. Just before he pushed the shock button, he would ask, "Is everybody ready?" Of course, he was not speaking to me - petrified and stone silent. Each time, I expected I would die. I would wake up with a violent headache and nausea. My mind was blurred. And I permanently lost eight months of my memory for events preceding the shock treatments. I also lost my self-esteem. I had been crushed as flat as a pancake. But I was very, very lucky. On one of those cold, winter mornings exactly fifty years ago my friend Susan never woke up after the shock. She had just turned seventeen. When she died, she became a part of me.

The ECT was a violent and damaging assault on my brain and my very soul. It made me emotionally worse, not better. I became catatonic and desperately in fear for my life.

EFFECTS OF ECT:

-----To this day, I have great trouble staying focused in a conversation, keeping my train of thought.

-----I forever lost the ability to do math in my head. Before that time, I had done very well in school.

-----When I was given an IQ test a few months after the ECT and asked the population of the USA, I answered 1,000. When he asked me to guess again, I answered 2,000. I remember having no idea where to find the answer in my head.

-----For me, in addition to losing my train of thought, the most troubling residual effect, by far, has been the memories of those traumatic mornings, the violent and abusive assaults on my brain.

For far too long there has been a collusion between the FDA, the APA, the AMA, and the companies which manufacture the shock machine. This is big business, and a lot of money is being made by many at the shameful expense of those who have been harmed over the years. To me, informed consent is meaningless. Those of us who have already experienced the ECT are the only truly informed. Right now, this is a human rights issue. And this is a torture issue.

In the end, after three years of hell, it was a kind young doctor, who spoke to me in a gentle voice, who gave me hope. He took me off all medication, expressed horror when hearing of my experience with ECT, and recognized that whatever my original problems had been, they were dwarfed by the magnitude of the subsequent ECT trauma. I am the person I am today because of his compassion and caring 47 years ago. Quite simply, he believed in me.

I urge you to BAN the use of this dangerous and barbaric machine, and by doing so finally to show the courage and understanding to support the many more humane and holistic approaches to healing emotional pain.