

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JLS-13 LOCKING FOR SANITY (6)

Shock Treatment

29 West 17th Street
New York, New York 10011
March 15, 1975

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

It was the end of a long morning of ordinary hearings at Manhattan State Hospital on Wards Island in the East River, and the clerk called out the name of the last case: Violet Weeks. The courtroom doors swung open. Three uniformed attendants wheeled in a rolling stretcher of heavy aluminum pipe with wide, treaded rubber wheels, eight feet long, four feet wide, and four feet high. On it was a woman in her nineties, covered lightly with blankets and perhaps under restraint around the waist and legs. She grasped the hand of a woman in her sixties, apparently a relative, who walked alongside. The attendants braked the stretcher in the aisle between the rows of benches where I sat and, with a long ratchet sound, lowered it to within two feet of the floor.

A tall gray-haired man in a dark suit rose from his seat in the back row to greet Mrs. Weeks. Her voice was small and raspy but audible throughout the room. "Hello, doctor."

"How do you feel today, Mrs. Weeks?"

"I feel dizzy. I feel bad," she moaned. "They beat me, doctor."

The younger woman stroked Mrs. Weeks' brow and hair. "Doctor, they beat me...they beat me...they beat me...." The

Jeffrey Steingarten is an Institute Fellow interested in the relationship among psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and law.

younger woman kneeled next to Mrs. Weeks and kissed her cheek to calm her. "Shhhhh, shhhhh."

"Doctor, they beat me...they hurt me, doctor...they beat me...."

"Just try to rest, Mrs. Weeks," the doctor said softly. Mrs. Weeks was quiet for several seconds. And then: "Doctor, they beat me...they beat me...." She held up her arm to show proof of her injury. I was close enough to see that there were no marks.

"I assume that this is her daughter," said the judge, referring to the younger woman who, alternately kissing Mrs. Weeks' cheek and stroking her brow, now sat on a chair one of the court officers had placed by the stretcher. She was meticulously dressed in a navy blue suit and stockings and dark lipstick.

"Doctor, they beat me...they beat me...they beat me, doctor...."

The judge called the MHIS¹ lawyer and the doctor to his desk to discuss a defect in the hospital's petition to administer ECT, electroshock treatment, to Mrs. Weeks. Ordinarily a voluntary patient must give consent before receiving a course of shock therapy, and when a hospital feels that a patient is not competent either to give or withhold consent, it must petition the court at a hearing with the patient present. The judge seemed inclined at first to postpone the hearing for a week because of the technical error in the hospital's papers, but realizing that Mrs. Weeks had been brought by ambulance that morning from a large voluntary hospital some distance away and seeing her condition, he decided to proceed. The doctor was sworn in.

"Doctor, they beat me...they beat me, doctor...they beat me...."

The doctor was an experienced clinician, certified as a psychiatrist in 1952. Mrs. Weeks' daughter had called him early in February, and he had admitted Mrs. Weeks a few days later. "The patient," he said, "is suffering from depression, confusion, agitation, anxiety, and negative feelings about herself. She is disinclined to take food or liquid. In the mental status exam we administered, she was confused as to time and place."

"Doctor, they beat me...." Mrs. Weeks' daughter rubbed her cheek against her mother's. "Shhhhh, shhhhh, shhhhh...."

¹ Mental Health Information Service

"Mrs. Weeks has eaten little in the past ten days," continued the doctor, "and has taken no more than two quarts of liquid a day. She refuses medication, both antibiotics and tranquilizers. She shows an increasing tendency to delusion, saying that the medicine will poison her, that a nurse put her in an oven, that the hospital staff has beaten her. The patient's medical doctor has examined her to assess the physical danger of electroshock and expressed the opinion that there is no absolute contraindication."

The judge asked for the witness's prognosis. He replied that there are two components of Mrs. Weeks' illness, Organic Brain Syndrome [senility], which is irreversible, and schizophrenia. Mrs. Weeks has a long history of schizophrenia, he said, and has received 11 courses of shock treatment over the past 21 years. Anti-psychotic drugs are of no use.

"Doctor, they beat me...they beat me...they beat me...."

"And your recommendation, doctor?" asked the judge.

"It is urgent that she receive ECT immediately in order to reverse the schizophrenic aspect of her illness."

The MHIS lawyer asked the doctor whether Mrs. Weeks were competent to consent or not to consent, and the doctor said no.

"Swear in the daughter," ordered the judge.

"Just stay where you are," a court officer said uneasily and placed a Bible under the daughter's right hand as she held her mother's hand with her left. Her graying hair was carefully set and brushed, and her face was powdered. She said, "My mother has responded beautifully to shock treatment in the past. She has lived a lovely life during the intervals between the recurrence of her illness, sometimes eight years, sometimes six months. If we could just have six months' peace!" She began to cry and buried her head in her mother's breast.

"You're hurting me, hurting me," Mrs. Weeks moaned.

"Try to control yourself," said the judge. "You're aware of her heart problem?"

The daughter became a bit more composed. "Yes, but I've been assured by her medical doctor that with proper anesthesia she could undergo treatment."

"They beat me...they beat me...doctor, they beat me...."

"I find," said the judge, "that Mrs. Weeks has a serious mental illness, that she requires care and treatment, and that her judgment is so impaired that she does not understand the need for such treatment. An order will be made that shock treatment be performed and hospitalization continued."

"On application for shock treatment, please submit an order," called the clerk.

The attendants returned to the courtroom, lifted the stretcher to its full height with a loud click, and rolled Mrs. Weeks into the hallway. Her voice could be heard until the courtroom doors were shut. "Doctor, they beat...."

Mrs. Weeks' daughter walked up the judge and bent over to speak with him. She began to cry again, and the judge put his hand on her shoulder. The daughter alternately wept and talked with the judge, and I could not hear what they were saying. After a few minutes she stood straight, almost smiling, and walked from the courtroom.

The judge pulled a large white handkerchief from his jacket pocket and wiped his eyes. Someone said, court adjourned.


Jeffrey Steingarten