



American Expression E0158 Lobotomy

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Lobotomy is a form of neurosurgery, historically employed as a treatment for various mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and severe depression. In the past, it was considered an extreme but viable solution when all other forms of treatment failed, often yielding dramatic and highly unpredictable results. However, the procedure is now seen as barbaric and unethical, largely abandoned due to the development of more effective and less invasive therapies, including psychiatric medications and psychotherapies.

The word "lobotomy" is derived from the Greek words "lobos," meaning "lobe" and "tome," meaning "cut or slice." It's a term that describes the surgical incision into the frontal lobes of the brain. This area of the brain is responsible for a range of functions, including problem-solving, spontaneous activity, memory, language, initiation of voluntary movements, and judgement.

The procedure was developed in the 1930s by Portuguese neurologist António Egas Moniz, who believed that mental disorders were caused by fixed circuits in the brain, and by severing these connections, patients could be relieved of their symptoms. Moniz was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1949 for this work, although his contribution is highly controversial today.

The most common technique for a lobotomy involved the surgeon drilling holes in the patient's skull on either side of the frontal lobes, then inserting a specialized instrument, known as a leucotome or orbitoclast. The instrument was used to sever the connections between the frontal lobes and the rest of the brain. In the late 1940s, a modification of the procedure, called the transorbital lobotomy or "ice pick" lobotomy, was developed. This procedure was quicker and could be done without a traditional operating room, but was also riskier and resulted in even more unpredictable outcomes.

Lobotomies had a wide range of effects on patients. Some exhibited a reduction in symptoms, but it often came at the cost of significant personality and cognitive changes. Many became emotionally blunted, apathetic, or displayed childlike behavior. Some were left severely disabled or even died as a result of the procedure.

Today, the lobotomy is largely seen as a dark chapter in the history of mental health treatment. While it did lead to some important discoveries about brain function, the cost to patients was enormous. It stands as a stark reminder of the harm that can result when medical treatments are adopted without sufficient understanding of their effects, or consideration of their ethical implications.

With the advent of antipsychotic medications and a better understanding of mental illnesses, the lobotomy has been entirely replaced by safer and more effective treatments. Its use serves as a cautionary tale for modern medicine: a poignant example of how good intentions can lead to tragic results when tempered by lack of knowledge and disregard for patient wellbeing.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. In light of the harmful effects and ethical issues surrounding lobotomies, how might the decision to award António Egas Moniz the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine be reassessed today?
2. Given our current understanding of mental health, how might the development of the lobotomy have influenced or shaped current practices and treatments in psychiatry and neurology?
3. How might society and the medical community prevent a repeat of such harmful practices as lobotomies in the future? What safeguards could be put in place?
4. What are the ethical considerations when introducing a new treatment method in medicine, especially one that is invasive and has potential long-term effects? How can we balance the need for innovation with ensuring patient safety?
5. How have societal attitudes and understanding about mental health disorders changed since the era of lobotomies? What factors have driven these changes, and what impacts have they had on treatment methods?