

LOBOTOMIES: WHO NEEDS ALL THAT BRAIN?

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transorbital lobotomy. It involved inserting a thin surgical icepick-like device, called an orbitoclast, into one eye socket and hammering on the orbitoclast until the tip of it broke through the skull. When it entered the brain, the tip was moved around to destroy the brain tissue. This technique could take as little as 10 minutes and Freeman was once recorded performing more than 20 lobotomies in a day using this technique. He called his van the “lobotomobile” and he travelled in it to perform lobotomies and teach his procedure all around the U.S. His enthusiasm and support of the procedure helped spread its popularity this resulted in over 40 000 lobotomies performed in U.S. between the 1930s and 50s.

(9) In 1950, Freeman’s long time partner, Dr. James Watts, split from Freeman because he was disgusted with how often and carelessly Freeman used the procedure. Freeman never used gloves or wore a mask and would often performed lobotomies in non-surgical settings for an audience. Many lobotomies were done on people with minor psychological issues and even against the patient’s will when family members insisted on the procedure, often not understanding the potential outcomes. In the 1950s, antipsychotic and antidepressant drugs were shown to be more effective at treating mental illnesses without the severe side effects of a lobotomy. These days lobotomies are rarely performed and have been discredited as a useful treatment for mental illnesses.

Article Questions

- 1) What were lobotomies developed to treat?
They were developed to treat the symptoms found in people who were suffering from mental illnesses like mania, depression and schizophrenia.(1)
- 2) What is the prefrontal cortex responsible for?
It is responsible for higher order thinking like planning, decision making and the inhibition of inappropriate behaviors. It is also the source of one’s personality.(3)
- 3) What are some of the common negative side effects that occur after a lobotomy?
The loss of intelligence and personality as well as communication and motor impairment and sometimes even death.(3)
- 4) What is psychosurgery?
Brain surgery that is meant to alter mental functioning.(4)
- 5) Why does leucotomy/lobotomy target white matter for destruction?
White matter allows areas of the brain to communicate with each other. Destroying some of this communication was thought to remove symptoms of mental illness.(5)
- 6) What new technique did Walter Freeman develop? Describe how it was performed.
His new technique was the transorbital lobotomy. It involved inserting an orbitoclast through the eye socket and hammering it through the skull and into the brain to destroy the white matter in the prefrontal cortex.(8)
- 7) Why did James Watts end his partnership with Walter Freeman?
Watts was disgusted with how often and how carelessly Freeman used lobotomies on patients.(9)
- 8) Why did lobotomies become less popular and fade away as a useful technique for treating mental illness?
In the 1950s, the first antipsychotic and antidepressant drugs began being used on patients with much higher success rates than lobotomies could achieve and without the same disastrous side effects.(9)