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Utterly Shocking

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By KEN MAGUIRE, Associated Press

Patricia Rivera's smile disappears when she presses the button on what looks like a car-lock remote-control device.

The psychologist at the Judge Rotenberg Educational Center in Canton, Mass., believed to be the only school in the nation that uses skin-shock punishments to stop violent behavior, is sending 60 volts into her arm. It lasts two seconds.

"There are certain places where it's not used: the head, the spine, the lower back," she says before zapping herself in a demonstration. "My hand tensed up a little bit. Everybody has different skin types. It doesn't really leave an imprint."

Dr. Matthew Israel, the school's founder and chief defender, looks on.

"It's two seconds, but when you feel it, it seems longer," he said, likening the zaps to a bee sting.

The future of the controversial school, which has survived two attempts by Massachusetts to close it over its three-decade-long history, is in question yet again amid allegations that its unorthodox methods amount to abuse.

An investigation is under way to determine if a shock device malfunctioned, causing burns to one student, while another complaint contends a student lost too much weight. In addition, the center recently came under fire because its website described 14 of its staffers as psychologists when, in fact, they were clinicians.

In addition, the state of New York, which pays \$50 million a year to the center to care for 150 disabled New York youths, is considering no longer sending children to the facility because of concerns about the style of treatment.

"I don't understand how your state allows this to go on," said New York attorney Kenneth Mollins, who represents the mother of a former student.

Mollins has sued the state of New York, alleging that 17-year-old Antwone Nicholson's civil rights were violated by being punished too often with skin shocks.

"He was shocked for cursing. What 17-year-old doesn't curse?" Mollins said. "It's supposed to be used on low-functioning individuals who are banging their heads against the wall."

Israel started the school in 1971, in Providence, eventually moving to Canton, renaming itself after a Bristol County judge who approved a settlement in which the state paid \$580,000 after it

unsuccessfully sought to close the school. That was after the 1985 death of a 22-year-old student who suffered a seizure while restrained and forced to listen to static noise.

The campus, about 20 miles south of Boston, resembles an office park, complete with a walking trail, administrative offices and classrooms in two adjacent buildings. The center buses students to and from the 40 residential facilities it operates.

In 1997, the state paid \$1.5 million to settle a lawsuit after the state's highest court found that the then-head of the Department of Mental Retardation waged a campaign of disinformation in an effort to close the school because he opposed the skin-shock therapy.

"We're always being investigated," Israel said. "This is the most carefully inspected and overseen program that you will find."

Hear about shock therapy and what pops to mind are scenes out of the movie "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." But the skin shocks are not electroconvulsive therapy, which began in the 1930s as a way to treat schizophrenia.

The so-called "aversives" - negative punishment to modify behavior - date back centuries, when people believed the mentally ill were possessed by demons, University of South Carolina psychology professor Frederic Medway said.

"We've made so many advances using positive treatment, and pharmacological treatment, that these aversive treatments have gone by the wayside," he said.

Still, he said, with proper safeguards the skin-shock therapy may help people who haven't responded to medicine or positive reinforcement. Among the problems, he said, are that parents may not fully understand the treatment, and it simply may not work.

"It's really used as a last resort," he said.

Several states have outlawed such treatment on children, but Israel has a small army of parents who are loyal to the school and its methods. A group of parents shouted down TV news anchor Connie Chung when she tried to interview Israel in the 1990s.

Parents also write letters to lawmakers and testify at hearings, saying the Rotenberg Center is their only alternative.

Linda Burke's 19-year-old daughter, who has severe emotional and behavioral problems, has been at the center for one year. Burke recently gave permission for shock-therapy because her daughter attacked students and staff.

Just the approval and threat of being shocked had a chilling effect, Burke said.

"She realizes it's out there. She knows it's on the back burner," said Burke, who lives on Staten Island, N.Y. "She's actually making improvements."

"It is abusive," said Polyxane S. Cobb of the Coalition for the Legal Rights of People with Disabilities. "These kids, 24 hours a day, they are always being punished. It is illogical and it is cruel, and it violates their personal rights."

Three Massachusetts agencies, including the DMR and Department of Education, license the school for educational and residential programs. There are efforts in the Legislature to prohibit the shock treatments, but nothing has been enacted so far.

Many of the center's 250 students are autistic or mentally retarded and have exhibited self-abusive and outwardly violent behavior. Most are teenagers, but ages currently range from 8 to 45. Education programs are designed to teach a skill or obtain a high school diploma.

Half of the students are on the shock-punishment program. They wear either a backpack or fanny pack containing the shock device: a battery and stimulator attached to a wire that carries the voltage to an electrode just above the skin. There are up to five locations on the body where the student can be shocked.

Parental and court approval are required before a shock program begins. Teachers carry the remote controls in a plastic box with the students' photo attached, to avoid mistakes. Students are eligible to be shocked at any time but on average receive about one shock per week, Israel said.