

PERSPECTIVES

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Anything but ELECTRIC

A recent electric-chair execution in Florida again shows how barbaristic electrocution really is

If you woke up tomorrow morning and read in this newspaper that a man had grabbed onto a live electrical wire, accidentally electrocuting himself, one of your first thoughts would probably be "What a horrifying way to go."

Yet, put that same man in a state-sanctioned electric chair, pull the switch, causing the exact same death, and most of you would turn the page without thinking at all.

What's the difference between those two scenarios? Obviously, the first situation is an unfortunate mishap, while the second set of circumstances is an act to punish the person for committing the most heinous crime of all — murder.

Thirty-eight states carry the death penalty as a form of punishment, with 11 of those states having the option of the electric chair to perform the ritual. Of that latter group, just four — Alabama, Nebraska, Georgia and Florida — use electrocution as their sole method of execution.

Oregon uses lethal injection to carry out death sentences, and two recent experiences with Florida's electric chair are good reason for all states to eliminate this 2,000-volt shock treatment.

Various pro- and anti-death-penalty groups are debating the constitutionality issue of "cruel and inhumane punishment" in light of the Sunshine state's problems. In March 1997, witnesses reported that "five- to six-inch flames shot up" from Pedro Medina's head during his execution. Even the Vatican condemned the scene as "barbaric," and the use of electrocution in Florida was postponed and scrutinized.

Although the chair used for the acts was rebuilt earlier this year, another incident on July 1 put the issue back on the debate table. Blood pooled on the shirt front of

Allen Lee Davis, a 344-pound inmate, as he was put to

death. State officials said Davis had a nosebleed, but death-penalty opponents argued that the incident was yet another example of "cruel and inhumane punishment."

Here's how the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Brennan, Jr. described electrocutions in his 1984 dissent in *Glass v. Louisiana*:

"Witnesses routinely report that, when the switch is thrown, the condemned prisoner 'cringes,' 'leaps,' and 'fights the straps with amazing strength.' 'The hands turn red, then white, and the cords of the neck stand out like steel bands.' The prisoner's limbs, fingers, toes, and face are severely contorted. The force of the electrical current is so powerful that the prisoner's eyeballs sometimes pop out and 'rest on [his] cheeks.' The prisoner often defecates, urinates

and vomits blood and drool."

Does a supposedly civilized society really need to allow a third strike before putting to rest the use of electrocution?

This editorial is not to defend nor oppose the capital punishment issue as a whole. Similar to the extremely emotional abortion debate, people with opinions on the death-penalty topic are not likely to be swayed one way or another.

But can't we find common ground in the elimination of a "barbaric" method to deliver the message that with the act of murder comes the ultimate penalty?

While some people will probably never be convinced that electrocution is cruel and inhumane — one father of a murder victim in Florida responded to Medina's fiery death by saying, "They ought to put marshmallows on his head" — support for the changeover to lethal injection comes from odd sources.

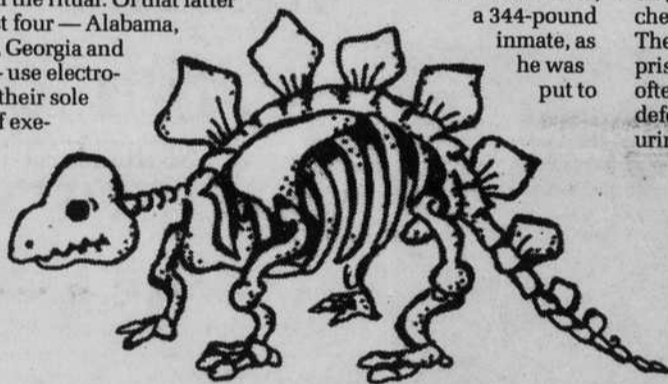
"Killing someone cannot be done humanely, but it can be done with as little pain as possible,

as little torment," commented Robyn Blumner of the American Civil Liberties Union, a vehement opponent to the death penalty.

The defining argument, however, likely comes from Justice Brennan, who said electrocutions are "nothing less than the contemporary technological equivalent of burning people at the stake."

As we approach the 21st century, shouldn't we take all the necessary steps to leave the 16th century behind?

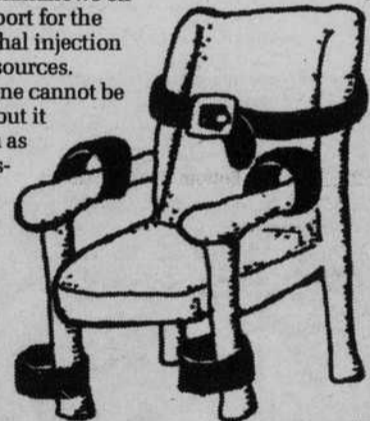
This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu.



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CORRECTION
 The July 20 article "Parent Trap" should have read: "On July 15, a second civil suit, asking for up to \$250,000, was filed against the Kinkel estate on behalf of survivor Richard Peek Jr. "The Kinkel estate is valued at \$528,127. "Teresa Miltonberger was shot in the forehead and in the right thigh." The Emerald regrets the error.

Oregon Emerald

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