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The Treatment of Alcoholism With Psychedelics

The recent discovery and application of psychedelic substances such as psilocybin, LSD, and mescaline in the treatment of chronic alcoholics represent a promising new approach to this major social problem. Four studies on the treatment of alcoholics with psychedelics will be reported and summarized (1, 2, 3, 4). All of these studies were conducted in Saskatchewan, Canada, in various hospital settings and by different researchers using reasonably good controls and follow-up methods.

The patient-populations in these studies varied somewhat among each other in terms of different psychopathological diagnostic categories. Typically, only the most difficult cases of chronic alcoholism were selected for study and treatment with psychedelics — patients who had undergone various forms of treatment over the years, including membership in Alcoholics Anonymous, without benefit.

The procedure employed in these studies generally used a single massive dose (200-1500 μ g) of LSD in one treatment session. (In one of the studies the patients had the option of further sessions, if needed.) The patients were prepared for the ingestion of the psychedelics through individual psychiatric screening, medical examination and individual and group discussions about the nature of the drug experience. The period of preparation varied from study to study, lasting from two days to two weeks.

The patients spent the day of the "session," or drug treatment, in the hospital where the drugs were administered. The physical setting was carefully prepared to give the patients a sense of esthetic enjoyment. The drugs were administered to each patient individually, with trained personnel and one of the researchers in attendance. All

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the reports emphasized the importance of the investigators' previous personal experience with the psychedelic substances to further the understanding and rapport with the patients.

Interviews were conducted at the height of the drug-experience and following the subsiding of the effects. For several days or weeks after the experience, the patients had an opportunity to discuss their experience with a psychiatrist or in a group.

For an average period of about one year the patients were followed up directly, or through Alcoholics Anonymous, for an assessment of the treatment effects. It should be noted that other forms of therapy such as occupational and recreational therapy, as well as superficial forms of psychotherapy, were employed in addition to the administration of the psychedelic substances. The major emphasis, however, was on the drug experience and was clearly so perceived by the patients.

The results of the treatment were assessed through ratings of the patient's behavior in terms of the following classification:

- 1) Much Improved — Complete abstinence for the assessment period.
- 2) Improved — Reduction in alcoholic consumption which was confirmed by objective observers.
- 3) Unchanged — No difference in drinking behavior observed.

Tables 1 and 2 list the combined results of the studies.

Table 1:

Results of Treatment of Chronic Alcoholics with Psychedelics

	Number of Patients	Much Improved	Improved	Unchanged	Lost for Follow-up
Study I ¹	24	6	6	12	—
Study II ²	16	10	5	1	—
Study III ³	61	30	16	15	—
Study IV ⁴	58	34	7	13	4
Total	159	80	34	41	4

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Table 2:

Results of Treatment of Control Group which Received No Psychedelics under Otherwise Identical Conditions⁵

	Number	Much Improved	Improved	Unchanged	Lost for Follow-up
Group I ⁶	35	4	4	9	18
Group II ⁷	45	7	3	12	23
Total	80	11	7	21	41

The results indicate that psychedelic drugs seem to be effective agents for behavior change in the treatment of chronic alcoholics who had been recalcitrant to any other form of treatment. Inspection of Tables 1 and 2 shows that the patients who were treated with psychedelic drugs show significantly more improvement than the patients in the control groups, who received no drugs. Of the patients who received psychedelic drugs, 72% (114 out of 159) were judged improved after one year, as contrasted to 46% (18 out of 39) who were followed up in the control groups.

The authors give various interpretations of their results on the basis of increased "self-awareness" and "self-acceptance" because of the drug experience. More research is needed to validate further the effectiveness of the psychedelic substances in the treatment of chronic alcoholism. But the beginnings, as reported above, seem very promising.

— The Editors

¹ Colin M. Smith, A new adjunct to the treatment of alcoholism: The hallucinogenic drugs. *Quart. J. Stud. Alcohol.*, 19, 406-417, 1958.

² N. Chwelow, D. B. Blewett, C. M. Smith, and A. Hoffer, Use of *d*-lysergic acid diethylamide in the treatment of alcoholism. *Ibid.*, 20, 577-590, 1959.

³ J. Ross MacLean, D. C. MacDonald, Ultan P. Byrne, and A. M. Hubbard, The use of LSD-25 in the treatment of alcoholism and other psychiatric problems. *Ibid.*, 22, 34-45, 1961.

⁴ Sven E. Jensen, A treatment program for alcoholics in a mental hospital. *Ibid.*, 23, 315-20, 1962.

⁵ Data from Sven Jensen.

⁶ Patients who received group therapy without LSD; they were "medically unfit" or refused LSD therapy.

⁷ Patients who received individual treatment; identical conditions as patients in Study IV, Table 1.