

## **Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies** **Summer, 1989**

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by Rick Doblin

### **Switzerland Leads the Way**

Great News! Finally, somewhere in the world, psychotherapeutic research with MDMA is taking place. About two years ago, over 30 Swiss psychiatrists interested in psychedelic psychotherapy and research formed the Swiss Psycholytic Association in order to formally request legal permission to use MDMA in treatment and research. In June of 1988, Swiss officials in the Office of Pharmaceuticals and Narcotics, of the Department of Public Health of the Ministry of the Interior, granted permission to six of the Association's psychiatrists to treat patients and conduct research not only with MDMA but also with LSD, mescaline, DMT, and 2CB. Psychiatric patients suffering from reactive depression, addictive disorders, character neuroses, phobias, psychosomatic illness, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and anorexia nervosa are being treated with MDMA-assisted psychotherapy, with very positive initial reports from both psychiatrists and patients. The Swiss psychiatrists have been told they will be permitted to administer these drugs for the next year or two, but in order to continue their work beyond that time will be required to show scientific data supporting their view that the drugs are both safe and efficacious.

In May of 1989, I went to Switzerland to observe the Swiss experience with regulated psychedelic research as part of my work towards a Masters in Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. The report I wrote was submitted for critique to U.S. officials in the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). Being here at the Kennedy School learning to be a bureaucrat (or at least think like one!) has provided me with an insightful training in governmental decision making, and remarkable opportunities to engage the present drug policy officials in dialogue. The fact that hundreds of patients have been successfully treated with MDMA in Switzerland strengthens the circumstantial case for research into the therapeutic use of MDMA.

### **MDMA Research in the United States**

In response to the estimated 400,000 doses of MDMA that are consumed in the United States every month (my estimate based on DEA seizures, and gossip), NIDA has decided to thoroughly evaluate the possible harm that may be caused by human use of MDMA. Eight university-based researchers are conducting NIDA-funded research on the neurological effects of MDMA and serotonin, while NIMH also has funded some basic neurotoxicity research.

One of NIDA's multi-year grants has gone to Dr. George Ricaurte of Johns Hopkins University for basic animal research. Dr. Ricaurte's primate study is investigating the mechanism by which damaged serotonin nerve terminals regenerate, and determining how long such regeneration takes, whether it will restore baseline levels, and whether

or not this degeneration has any practical significance or observable behavioral effects. Dr. Ricaurte's pilot study investigating the regeneration of serotonergic nerve terminals was partially supported by grants from MAPS.

NIDA is funding two studies of human users of MDMA. Dr. Marsha Rosenbaum is conducting a two year descriptive study of MDMA users, and assessing abuse potential. Nearing completion, preliminary reports note that "There appears to be minimal abuse in the population we have studied thus far. The most frequent use tends to occur during the first months following an initial experience. An abusive stage, if it occurs at all, tends to be brief."

NIDA's other human study is being conducted by Dr. Ricaurte, and involves 24 people whom have taken MDMA over 20 times volunteering to undergo three and a half days of hospital tests having their brain waves computer monitored during two nights of sleep, being given a complete series of neurological tests, a spinal tap, blood tests, a tryptophan challenge test, a pain sensitivity test, and various non-invasive puzzles and memory tests. MDMA users will be compared with a group of non-drug users and a group of MDMA naive drug users. Dr. Ricaurte's pilot studies of MDMA users at Stanford and Yale, which demonstrated the feasibility of the project, were partially supported by grants from MAPS. In addition, many of the volunteers for the study were referred by MAPS.

### A Call for Volunteers

Before studies evaluating possible benefits from MDMA, the FDA requires that MDMA's risks be carefully evaluated. Dr. Ricaurte's study of MDMA users will lead to the FDA's ability to make more informed assessments concerning the risks of MDMA, replacing fear with facts. Subjects will have all expenses covered to Baltimore, and be given a fee of \$400. If you or anyone you know is interested in volunteering, you can write or call me for more details. Though not the ideal vacation, it is fascinating to learn how one measures on all these various tests. It is a also very valuable contribution towards helping clarify our national policy towards MDMA. Due to confidentiality, identities of participants will not be disclosed. Even the Director of NIDA has no inherent right to see medical files.

### Preliminary Findings

When a primate is given a single oral dose of 2.5 mg/kg, which is higher than the standard therapeutic dose, there is no neurotoxicity at all. MAPS has contributed seed money to Dr. Ricaurte for a study in which an oral dose of 2.5 mg/kg of MDMA will be given once every two weeks week for four months, for a total of eight administrations. The study will help to determine the neurotoxic risk of multiple doses of 2.5 mg/kg, a dose pattern more similar to the average therapeutic or recreational than a single dose. This study will be concluded in late 1989.

Degenerated serotonergic nerve terminals experience regeneration. Dr. Ricaurte demonstrated that ten weeks after exposure to very large doses, primates that had 80-90% reductions in their serotonin levels has recovered roughly half their lost nerve terminals. Currently underway is another study by Dr. Ricaurte, partially assisted by MAPS, which is investigating whether serotonergic nerve terminals will exhibit total recovery after a period of 40 weeks. This study will also be completed in late 1989.