

FINDINGS FROM THE TWO NIDA-FUNDED HUMAN STUDIES

NIDA has funded two major studies of the effects of MDMA on humans, neither actually administering MDMA to the subjects. A sociological description of MDMA users based on their self-reports cost NIDA \$200,000 and was completed over the course of two years by a research group in San Francisco, with Dr. Marsha Rosenbaum as principle investigator and Jerome Beck, Deborah Harlow, Douglas McDonnell, Patricia Morgan, and Lynne Watson as co-investigators. A study comparing MDMA users to non-users for signs of serotonin neurotoxicity is costing NIDA \$500,000 and is halfway through its three year schedule at Johns Hopkins, conducted by Dr. George Ricaurte.

In the sociological study, researchers interviewed 100 MDMA users in depth. Jerry Beck went on to analyze the study for his Ph.D. thesis in Public Health at the University of California at Berkeley. The recently minted Dr. Jerry Beck reviewed the data from 100 MDMA users and concluded in his Ph.D thesis that virtually all the people who were interviewed felt they had benefited from their use of MDMA, and that very few experienced periods of problem use. He observed,

“Based on MDMA’s reputed qualities, one might assume that a significant number of users would eventually experience major problems resulting from abuse and/or dependence in the pursuit of “Ecstasy”. However, the low levels of such problems seen with MDMA are perhaps best explained by limiting factors intrinsic to the experience itself.”

(The NIDA report, which has not been widely publicized by NIDA, is available from MAPS for \$30. Jerry Beck’s Ph.D. thesis is also available from MAPS for \$30.)

A CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS FOR THE JOHNS HOPKINS HUMAN STUDY

The NIDA serotonin neurotoxicity study compares 24 MDMA users, who each must have taken MDMA 10 times or more, with two control groups also of 24 people each. The study measures serotonin levels of the subjects through the analysis of serotonin metabolites found in the spinal fluid, and examines most of the subject’s physical and mental systems wholly or partially mediated by the serotonin system. Since serotonin is involved with the sleep/waking transition, two nights are spent in a sleep laboratory where brain waves are monitored. Various psychological tests are given which explore the subjects concentration, memory, visual and pain perception, appetite, reaction times, etc.

Each MDMA subject is age, sex, educational history, health and socioeconomically matched, more or less, with two controls, one with a similar drug history but without exposure to MDMA and the other without any history of drug use. Needless to say, finding exactly matched controls is the weak part of this experiment. Having people act as their own controls, tested before and after MDMA use, would be an ideal experimental design but would require the actual administration of MDMA and is not permitted.

MAPS has helped recruit many of the subjects for this experiment. Participating in this experiment is one way to make a major contribution to MDMA research. NIDA has set out to find evidence of MDMA-related brain damage and it seems an appropriate response by MDMA users to give them their best shot at finding it, in ourselves. **If you are opposed to animal studies, this is an alternative.**

Subjects in this study enter Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland on any Monday night of their choosing, completing their tests Friday around noon. NIDA pays all transportation expenses of the subject and \$400 compensation. NIDA is spending about \$6,000 per subject, and at completion of the experiment all personal data will be given to the subjects. The spinal tap procedure has a reputation much more fearsome than deserved. Though it feels very weird, it is relatively painless. The main complication, which occurs to about a third of the subjects, is spinal headaches which go away when you lie down but can last a week or more. I had one after my first spinal tap and not after my second, two years later. For more information about participating in this experiment, contact Dr. George Ricaurte at (301) 550-0993. Feel free to contact me as well.

SWITZERLAND PSYCHEDELIC RESEARCH UPDATE

Last summer, the MAPS newsletter began with the heading GREAT NEWS and reported on the legal therapeutic use of LSD and MDMA in Switzerland, at the time the only place in the world where such work was legally taking place. Permission to prescribe MDMA or LSD was granted by the Swiss Health Authorities to a small group of six Swiss psychiatrists, all of whom belonged to the Swiss Association for Psycholytic Therapy (SAPT). A custom designed in-patient treatment ward was opened at the Swiss Red Cross Hospital in Bern for the more seriously ill patients.

Since permission was granted, several hundreds of patients have been successfully treated with MDMA and LSD-assisted psychotherapy for psychological conditions ranging from post-traumatic stress syndrome, anorexia, depression, phobias and obsessive/compulsive disorders to marital counseling and psychological aspects of terminal illness.

A survey of the six Swiss psychiatrists using psychedelics was conducted under the direction of Dr. Christian Scharfetter by Swiss researcher Ernst Benz, for his Ph.D thesis. Also newly minted, Dr. Benz reported that "MDMA was described as the safest of the drugs, since it caused anxiety in so few patients, and effected a mild and positively experienced emotional expansion so that patient resistance to the drug rarely occurred. Patients rarely had feelings of physical disintegration or isolation from their bodies [Note: As sometimes occurs with LSD]. MDMA inspires symbolic understanding and, above all, physical sensation and insight, strengthening patients enthusiasm for interaction and making communication more direct so that they deal with one another more easily and feel better able to tolerate others. All members of SAPT are of the opinion that MDMA in a standard dose of up to 150 mgs. is relatively non-toxic." (Ernst Benz's thesis, which also reviews the work of Drs. Grof and Leuner, is available for \$30 from MAPS but only in the original German.)

UNSUCCESSFUL MAPS ATTEMPTS AT COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH

Due to the opportunity Swiss psychiatrists had to actually administer MDMA, MAPS attempted to initiate collaborative research on MDMA neurotoxicity between Swiss psychiatrists and Dr. George Ricaurte. Dr. Ricaurte visited the Swiss psychiatrists and prepared a protocol which called for spinal fluid to be taken from patients before and after exposure to MDMA, then placed in liquid nitrogen for shipment to Johns Hopkins for analysis.