

PERSONAL ACCOUNT

experiences of an mdma research subject: dr. ricaurte's neurotoxicity research – round two

I do believe in research

FIVE YEARS AGO I WAS A SUBJECT in Dr. George Ricaurte's MDMA research study at Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center in Baltimore. I wanted to be in the study because scientific testing is necessary if sanity is ever to come to drug policy and I wanted to know what my personal tests would show. I had used MDMA about 200 times at that point.

Most readers of this newsletter are familiar with Dr. Ricaurte's work. The protocol consisted of psychological testing, sleep studies, a spinal tap and an L-tryptophan challenge. I did not fare well from these tests. I came home with a headache from the spinal tap and feeling hostile, angry and loathe to be touched from the L-tryptophan.

When Dr. Ricaurte called again in May 1995 and asked me to go to Baltimore to undergo an MRI and two PET scans, I was not at all enthusiastic. In fact, I told him "No." I have permanent eye make-up with a ferrous base, so an MRI might cause skin irritation. I have silicon breast implants and thought the radioactive drug used in the PET scan might adversely effect whatever balance my body has with them. I had never been furnished my personal results from the first study. However, I do believe in research and have now used MDMA about 375 times so I have a personal interest. After Dr. Ricaurte changed the MRI to a CAT scan (no magnets) and a rheumatologist called and said that in her opinion breast implants would cause no condition that the PET scan would exacerbate, I agreed to be a subject again. I also agreed to be the first MDMA user to undergo an m-CPP challenge. This is a drug used to diagnose anxiety disorders.

I arrived at Johns Hopkins nuclear medicine department at about 1:00 PM on a Tuesday. That afternoon technicians made my mask and Dr. Szabo did the CAT scan. When I first saw the mask it looked like a white board with two holes and two slits. The technicians heated it until it became pliable, then pressed it very snugly over my head from just above the top of my forehead to the end of my nose. The holes went over my eyes and my ears went through the slits. It became rigid. They used it to bolt my head to the table during the CAT scan and the PET scans! The CAT scan was a piece of cake. It involved lying still on a table for about 30 minutes while images were made of my brain.

The night nurse at the clinical research center awakened me at 5:15 AM Wednesday morning to go to the nuclear medicine department for the PET scans. An anesthesiologist attached a complicated device to my right wrist. Technicians put other needles with IV tubes in both arms. Then they bolted and strapped me to the PET scan table. For 95 minutes a radioactive drug went through my system while the PET "camera" made images of my brain and a technician periodically took blood from my wrist. When they finally unbolted my head, I sat up and saw two images of my brain on a monitor. Then I walked around the halls for 30 minutes pushing my IV bag holder. Then they did it all again! It was really hard to lie down on that table the second time.

I felt "drugged" and began getting a slight headache while the PET scans were going on. When I got back to the clinical research center, about 3:00 PM, I ate lunch. Mistake! By 6:00, I was throwing up and my head was in a vise. By design, no tests were scheduled for me the next day. If anyone is going to get sick from a test, it will be me. I slept until about noon Thursday and was feeling normal by about 3:00 PM.

Friday I was taken to Bethesda to the National Institute of Mental Health to undergo the m-CPP challenge. I was injected with a placebo through an IV tube and monitored for about two hours and then was injected with m-CPP and monitored for about two hours. Dr. Una McCann, the psychiatrist who supervised the procedure, asked me not to discuss my reaction to the drug because I might influence other subjects. So I won't.

The m-CPP wore off as expected and Friday night I had a very nice soft shell crab dinner, not controlled by the research center's dietician. I flew home Saturday morning. This time I did not get home sick. Huge relief!

I was given most of the results of my tests of five years ago while I was at Johns Hopkins for the second round of tests - CSF monoamine metabolite level 9.9, everything within normal parameters. I have been promised preliminary results of my PET scans in a few weeks, after they have been analyzed. The results will not be considered final until the study is complete.

I am very hopeful that all this will someday do someone some good. •

Dianne

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