

Heffter Research Institute

The Heffter Research Institute: New Swiss Program

The Heffter Research Institute has been in the process of setting up a clinical research program on psychedelics in Switzerland. Swiss authorities are open to research designed to test the efficacy of psychedelic medicines for therapeutic use in human beings, and have welcomed our efforts. We now have an agreement with the Psychiatric University Hospital at the University of Zürich to set up a Heffter program as an official part of the University's Department of Psychiatry. The agreement will allow us to build a solid and long-term research program with a team of in-house researchers. Dr. Franz Vollenweider, who is a professor of psychiatry at the University and a longtime collaborator with Heffter (and recently elected to the board of directors), is the Medical Director of the Heffter Swiss program. He has been supervising the development of a protocol for the first study in the new Heffter Swiss clinical research program.

Slated to begin in the spring of 2000, the study will involve patients with depression. It is designed to test whether experiences of temporary ego dissolution, medically facilitated through the use of a psychoactive agent, can ameliorate depression in a sizable population of patients. If the results are positive, the study will demonstrate the medical efficacy of psychedelic therapy in a robust way, according to the most stringent contemporary research designs available.

In very general terms the psilocybin study will work this way: patients with depression will be enrolled in a double-blind placebo-controlled study in which they will be treated on four occasions with psilocybin or an active placebo in a group setting with a trained psycholytic psychiatrist. The acute experiences of each patient will be assessed using a well-validated



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scale, the Altered States of Consciousness scale; the clinical status of each patient will be monitored using established clinical scales and blind raters. Preliminary studies have demonstrated robust changes in measures of ego dissolution using this

approach in normal volunteers. The study will be supervised by Dr. Vollenweider, and will be a cooperative effort with a group of Swiss psycholytic psychiatrists who are experienced in administering psychedelics. This study will have a very tight experimental design, rigorous assessment measures, and careful data analysis.

We hope that this study will lead to the Swiss government granting a license to do psychedelic psychotherapy. Such a license was in place in Switzerland at one time, but the government has requested new evidence of efficacy before it can be re-issued. This study is designed to provide such evidence.

The study may open the door to further studies that, for example, use PET scans and MRI imaging to investigate and map the brain states associated with transcendent experience. A long-term research goal at Heffter is to answer this question: from the point of view of neuroscience, what is the nature of the "self" that dissolves in transcendent experience, what are its neurobiological substrates in the brain, how does this "self" reconstitute when the subject leaves the state of illumination, and in what way is this "self" different after such an experience? Answers to these questions should provide important information that leads to better understanding of how different states of consciousness may, for example, further healing and affect character formation and personality.

The coming year will be an exciting time for Heffter, as the new Swiss clinical research program comes on line, and begins to produce results. We will keep you informed! •