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Ecstasy: Evil drug or a cure?

Psychiatrist gets FDA's OK for human trials

By Lynn Franey
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Club-goers call it the love drug. College students call it the hug drug. Federal regulators call it downright dangerous.

It is widely known as Ecstasy, a cousin to hallucinogens and amphetamines that is said to enhance emotional well-being. Banned by the Food and Drug Administration in 1985, it has since been linked to a dozen deaths and was blamed for more than 200 emergency room visits last year alone. Tests on animals have shown it may damage nerve cells.

But a researcher at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center near Torrance said there could be an upside to Ecstasy, whose chemical name is 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, or MDMA. Charles Grob, a psychiatrist, has secured the first FDA approval for human trials of the drug.

The experiments are designed to lead to tests of Ecstasy as a possible painkiller for the terminally ill and for use in psychotherapy.

"Hundreds of thousands of young people have taken it," Grob said. "But we know very little about it. There's lots of talk about potential dangers, but we want to explore it extensively."

Few in the scientific community are enthused about MDMA's potential benefits. Many likened

advocates of its therapeutic attributes to 1960s boosters of LSD.

"When LSD was first discovered, that same view of therapeutic use was popular but it turned out to be completely wrong," said Dr. Stephen

People are predisposed to look at this as negative. It's an issue that gets sensationalized so easily.

— Charles Grob, psychiatrist who has secured FDA approval for human trials of the drug Ecstasy

Stahl, an LSD expert at UCSD.

But even researchers who have found harmful results in MDMA animal trials say they approve of Grob's initial study. They say that much needs to be learned about what MDMA does to the human brain and heart, and that the drug may have some treatment value.

'Drugs aren't all evil'

"We need to get rid of the drug-war mentality and see that drugs aren't all evil," said Dr. David Nichols, a Purdue University researcher who tested MDMA on rats in the early 1980s.

MDMA was discovered quietly in Europe about 80 years ago, surfaced in Berkeley in the 1970s and hit the nightclub scene in the past decade. It remains popular at "rave" parties in big cities, including Los Angeles, and among college students.

Grob said the FDA approved his testing proposal after years of turning down similar plans. In the study's first phase, he will give Ecstasy to six health professionals who have previously used MDMA on their own. He will then monitor their sleep patterns, conduct brain scans and perform a variety of other medical tests.

He said he hopes to dispel some of the rumors about MDMA heard on dance floors and campuses. These include whispered reports that it drains spinal fluid and acts temporarily as an aphrodisiac, only to cause longer-term impotence.

The second part of Grob's trials, which has yet to win FDA approval, is designed to determine whether Ecstasy eases pain in terminal cancer patients and helps them, as a psychotherapeutic agent, cope with the knowledge that they are going to die.

Grob said those applications are "way, way down the line. That's putting the cart before the horse."

But Rick Doblin, an unabashed proponent of psychedelic drugs, said he hopes Grob's study will open the door to MDMA's use in treating people who suffer mental illnesses, are recovering from traumatic events or just struggling with a marriage.

"I think MDMA has a significant place in the future of psychiatry and then in a liberalized world where adults have free choice for these kinds of experiences," Doblin said from the North Carolina office of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, a group he founded.

MDMA was already popular among psychotherapists when the government outlawed it. Advocates say it allows people to lower psychological barriers between themselves and others and become less hostile.

College-aged people have more prosaic uses for the drug. They often take it alone to dance all night or, in a highly dangerous practice, mix it with LSD, marijuana and alcohol.

Ecstasy users say that since 1985 the drug's quality has gone down and its price up — to \$20 or more per capsule.

The Drug Enforcement Administration has blamed MDMA for 12 deaths in the United States, most stemming from heart failure and

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accidents. In one case, an Ecstasy user tried to climb a live electrical wire.

Deaths also have been reported at rave parties in England. Grob said those fatalities probably resulted in part from a lack of oxygen and water in the clubs. Some rave parties charge as much for water as alcohol, and turn off the taps in the bathrooms, Grob noted. Dancers experiencing Ecstasy's hours-long euphoria can become dehydrated and fall into seizures, he added.

Last year, 238 people were rushed to American emergency rooms because of bad reactions to Ecstasy, according to the Department of Health and Human Services.

That was a tiny percentage of all drug-related emergency room visits, which numbered 443,500.

California labs busted

Illegal MDMA production in the United States apparently is on the rise. Nine Ecstasy labs, most of them in California and Texas, were busted last year, up from one in 1985. The DEA raided four MDMA labs between January and September of this year.

Grob and other researchers said Ecstasy's popularity among the club set has hampered their efforts to unlock its therapeutic potential.

"People are predisposed to look at this as negative," Grob said. "It's an issue that gets sensationalized so easily."