

## New looks at drug effects, psychiatric care

**New Peer Review Appeals System.** A formal channel has been set up to air complaints about decisions in the processing and review of grant applications to the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration. As published in *NIH Guide to Grants and Contracts*, the system permits confidential examination of applicants' concerns. The appeals system does not apply to funding decisions, nor is it intended to resolve purely scientific disputes between peer reviewers and investigators. The system is similar to the appeals system in effect at the National Institutes of Health.

**Scientists Study "Fake" Cocaine.** National Institute on Drug Abuse (Rockville, Md) researchers have found in animal studies that fencamfamine, a noncontrolled compound being sold illicitly as "fake cocaine," shares some attributes with cocaine. Marcus Risner, PhD, and Edward Cone, PhD, report that when fencamfamine and cocaine are intravenously self-administered, the drugs are about equally potent in their ability to reinforce drug-taking behavior. In another animal test, the two drugs appeared to have similar subjective effects. Furthermore, the reinforcing properties of the drugs may have a common mechanism of action. Fencamfamine thus could become a tool in the study of the mechanism of action of cocaine and other psychomotor stimulant drugs, National Institute on Drug Abuse officials say.

**Synthesis of MDMA, the "Ecstasy Drug":** Scientists at the Research Triangle Institute (NC), under a National Institute on Drug Abuse contract, have completed synthesis of 500g of MDMA (3-4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine), the first large-scale synthesis of the drug. The availability of MDMA in such quantity will allow critical abuse liability studies to be done in large primates at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. The Drug Enforcement Administration will use such studies to determine whether to extend permanently its scheduled control of the controversial substance.

**Cost of Psychiatric Care Systems.** Nonhospital, 24-hour acute care in psychiatric health facilities, licensed in California to provide a cost-effective alternative to inpatient care, has been found to be similar in cost but less effective than treatment in general hospital psychiatric care units. A study shows that while the per diem cost of psychiatric health facility care is 40% less than in a general hospital unit, overall charges using a mix of the two were only \$24 less than the \$2,545 for hospital care. Length of stay averaged 10.4 days in the health facility system compared with 8.2 days in the hospital. Also, 72% of the patients treated in the hospital and only 62% of

the health facility patients showed improvement. More of the psychiatric health facility patients regressed (10% compared with 4%). The study was conducted by Maurice Rappaport, MD, PhD, Langley Porter Psychiatric Institute, San Jose, Calif, and Howard Goldman, MD, PhD, National Institute of Mental Health, Rockville, Md.

**Mental Patients' Informed Consent.** Studies by Barbara Stanley, PhD, of Wayne State University School of Medicine, Detroit, challenge the popular belief that psychiatric patients are less able than other patients to make decisions about and give informed consent to participating in research or experimental procedures. Stanley found that competency to do so did not differ significantly, but she recommends that a patient's competency be assessed if found questionable. The legal presumption is that a person is competent unless shown to be otherwise, according to Stanley.

**Alcohol-Related Traumatic Injury, Performance.** The leading cause of death for Americans between the ages of 1 and 44 years is unintentional injury—more than 100,000 die annually—and alcohol and other drugs appear to be involved frequently. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism has announced support for research on the extent, causes, and results of alcohol-involved unintentional injury and death as related to transportation, occupation, home, and recreational activities. Among questions are the effects of alcohol on selected simple and complex behaviors, ranging from basic neuromuscular and cognitive functioning to the performance of highly skilled tasks, such as driving a car, flying an airplane, or operating other sophisticated machinery. Also sought are studies of medical complications caused by the presence of alcohol in injured tissue, interaction of alcohol with medication, and development and assessment of prevention programs.

**Not Easy To Quit Smoking Cigarettes.** National Institute on Drug Abuse grantees at the University of Washington, Seattle, have found that, regardless of type of cessation program, significantly more smokers "treated" (37%) maintain abstinence one year later than those who tried to quit unaided (18%). This suggests, they say, that cessation programs can significantly reduce relapse.

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