



MAPS

Bulletin of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies

“A Tidal Wave of Ecstasy!” On March 21, 2001, this evocative phrase washed over me as I watched C-SPAN for all three hours of a U.S. Senate hearing on “The Use of the Drug Ecstasy.” I imagined a gentle tidal wave of warm, wet water, with myself tumbling over and over joyously in the midst of it, finally landing, laughing and unbruised, in the arms of a lifeguard on a sunny, sandy beach.

Unfortunately, the tidal wave of ecstasy carried totally different connotations for the Senators. In the fall of 2000, Congress had passed a bill asking the U.S. Sentencing Commission to recommend an increase in the penalties for MDMA. Two days before the Senate hearing, several MDMA researchers, drug policy activists and I had fruitlessly testified before the Sentencing Commission about MDMA’s risks and benefits, opposing the increase in penalties on scientific grounds (<http://www.maps.org/news>). The day before the Senate hearing, the Commission announced its decision. Dose for dose, Ecstasy would now be more heavily punished than heroin! In testimony presented to the Senators, ecstasy was linked with poison, abuse, death, brain damage, addiction, violence, damage to dopamine and serotonin brain cells, rotting flesh falling off the side of a user’s face, holes in the brain, a high school cheerleader unable to make it to practice since she was in thrall to ecstasy and would “lie, cheat and steal” to buy more, and a generation of young people who thought MDMA was harmless even as it insidiously robbed them of their mental abilities and moral sensibilities.

Letter from Rick Doblin, Ph.D., MAPS President

How can MAPS move forward with MDMA psychotherapy research in this overheated environment? It’s clear to anyone paying attention that MDMA isn’t harmless. MDMA has its share of risks, even fatal ones, especially when it is taken in non-medical contexts. Yet the Senators saw only the risks, and portrayed the extreme cases as if they were the average experience. They also denied the existence of any benefits, even when users claimed to have benefited.

On the federal level, the FDA is a rare and rational agency that still prioritizes science over drug war politics. The FDA is more responsive to the needs of seriously ill patients than to the misguided crusade for a drug-free America. As the tidal wave of ecstasy gathers momentum, MAPS is seeking a safe harbor at the FDA for a pilot study of MDMA in the treatment of patients with chronic Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The MAPS-supported protocol soon to be submitted to the FDA represents the culmination of almost two years of work conducted by a team of researchers. MAPS funded the creation of a complete digitized bibliography of the entire peer-reviewed scientific literature on MDMA, and also funded the writing of a comprehensive review of all the published data, as well as the latest unpublished data from on-going government-approved clinical trials. Finally, MAPS helped bring together an outstanding team of researchers to design the protocol, and gathered a group of experts to critique and improve the proposed protocol design.

Call me brain-damaged, but I believe that the protocol will, in some form, be approved this summer. FDA approval will be a watershed event in our 16-year effort to initiate MDMA psychotherapy research, starting when MDMA was first criminalized in 1985. FDA approval will mark the beginning of MAPS’ \$5 million, 5-year plan to develop MDMA into a prescription medicine (<http://www.maps.org/research/mdmaplan.html>).

If MAPS’ staff and membership continue to work together patiently and persistently, we should be able to show the Senators that MDMA, as well as other psychedelics and marijuana, can be successfully and beneficially integrated into our shared culture. Let’s continue to work together to ride the tidal wave safely to shore!

Rick Doblin, Ph.D.
MAPS President