

Healing highs

An advocate of using the drug Ecstasy in psychiatric treatment hopes to conduct trials in Thailand

Richard E Doblin has a mission: turning MDMA, better known as the illegal party drug Ecstasy, into a prescription medicine for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder and other conditions such as advanced cancer.

The 53-year-old founder of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) was in Bangkok last week to explore the possibility of conducting a clinical trial here.

Given the controversial nature of the project, Doblin isn't sure if the Thai government will welcome his experiment.

So far MAPS has conducted clinical trials on MDMA in the US, Switzerland and Israel.

"We're restarting the trials in Spain [after the tests were earlier suspended by the government]. We hope to get approval from Thailand for clinical trials, which usually last from one and a half years to two years, on the tsunami victims.

"We'd like to have the experiment in a controlled environment in which MDMA and a placebo are given to tsunami victims along with psychotherapy," he says.

A PhD in public policy from Harvard University, Doblin studied psychology during his undergraduate years in the 1980s at the University of South Florida.

Doblin says he sees Sigmund Freud and Christopher Columbus in a similar fashion: both had the wrong maps - of the mind and the Earth, respec-

tively - but their achievements were ground-breaking.

"Freud's work on the unconscious was like a window into our minds, even though his mental map was wrong. I guess we're still underdeveloped emotionally while we may be overdeveloped intellectually. Psychedelic studies should help bring in more balance," he says.

Doblin founded MAPS in 1986 to promote medical and scientific

research on psychoactive drugs, especially MDMA. MDMA was developed in 1912 by pharmaceutical company Merck but was never marketed.

The synthetic drug resurfaced in the 1970s and was briefly and

quietly used by psychotherapists. MDMA was outlawed by the US government and other countries around 1984 following widespread recreational use of the drug, which was dubbed Ecstasy by underground manufacturers.

Some psychiatrists believed that MDMA was safe as a therapeutic adjunct when used under medical supervision. However, there were no controlled scientific studies to prove this before drug enforcement authorities in the US and other countries banned its use.

Doblin says MAPS hopes to change all this if it can prove scientifically that MDMA has obvious medical use and

should be regulated as a prescription medicine.

The non-profit body, which last year raised about US\$1 million (Bt35.8 million) to fund its work, expects to get a total of 600 subjects worldwide for clinical trials of MDMA.

An advocate of public policy reform on drugs, especially MDMA and marijuana, Doblin says the anti-drug war around the world has proved to be ineffective and even counterproductive.

Governments should consider decriminalising certain drug use step by step and making policy based on scientific fact and not political agendas that exaggerate certain drugs' harmful effects.

"The drug-war trend is losing support. It costs too much money and it's not effective. It's less and less popular," says Doblin.

He says he was appalled to learn about the Thaksin government's war on drugs, in which about 2,500 people were victims of extrajudicial killings.

Drug wars are often counterproductive because racism, prejudice, scapegoating and money or corruption are usually involved, according to Doblin.

Drug wars also have demonising



DOBLIN: hopes to get permission for MDMA trials on tsunami survivors.

effects, making it more difficult to get support from research on the medical use of certain drugs.

Doblin says the policy-reform movement is gaining momentum, with some countries - such as Switzerland, the Netherlands, Spain and Mexico - starting to decriminalise certain drugs.

In the meantime, other countries are still concerned about the risks of legalising some drugs, even though they are aware of the negative consequences of anti-drug policies.

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