

More research needed on benefits of psychedelic drugs

October 9 2014, by Kate Bourne

A University of Adelaide philosophy scholar is calling for more research into the therapeutic benefits of psychedelic drugs, with early studies suggesting these substances can provide lasting psychological benefits.

Speaking in the lead up to Global Drug Safety Day (16 October 2014), University of Adelaide philosophy PhD student Chris Letheby says [psychedelic drugs](#) were researched and used as treatments for various psychiatric conditions in the mid-20th century; however, uncontrolled use of these drugs in the 1960s led to panic, the banning of substances and the subsequent termination of research and clinical use.

"Psychedelic drugs work by inducing an altered state of consciousness and the intensity of the effect varies from person to person. Examples include substances like lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), ketamine, dimethyltryptamine and psilocybin (the active ingredient in 'magic mushrooms')," says Mr Letheby.

"Psychiatrists in the 1950s were impressed with the effectiveness of psychedelic drugs, claiming extraordinary success rates with treating alcoholism and alleviating symptoms of other [psychiatric conditions](#).

"Psychedelics were also claimed to cause positive personality changes in healthy subjects. However, much of the research into these drugs in the mid-20th century has been criticised on methodological grounds," he says.

Mr Letheby says that after decades of abandonment, scientists have recently resumed researching psychedelic drugs, recognising the potential for these substances to assist sufferers of a range of mental health issues.

"Scientific studies into the effects of psychedelic drugs on humans resumed in the 1990s. One study involved the administration of psilocybin to nine patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder, all of whom showed significant reductions in symptoms not only during the drug experience but also at a follow-up 24 hours later.

"Another study tested the effects of a psilocybin session on late-stage terminal cancer patients experiencing anxiety related to their illness, and these patients displayed significant reductions in anxiety during the experience as well as at two month follow-ups.

"More research is still needed but there is now enough information to justify taking quite seriously the possibility of strong psychological change resulting from a single administration of a psychedelic," he says.

Mr Letheby is writing a PhD on the various philosophical issues arising from the therapeutic and transformative potential of psychedelic drugs.

"Unsupervised recreational use of these drugs can certainly be dangerous and I am absolutely not advocating that," he says. "But research suggests carefully controlled use may be highly beneficial. As education theorist Ken Tupper says, when considering [psychoactive drugs](#), policymakers need to think not just about harm reduction, but also about benefit maximisation."

Provided by University of Adelaide

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