

'Hippie' psychedelic drugs show promise for treatment

EXCLUSIVE

By **TESSA AKERMAN**, REPORTER

1:01PM JULY 1, 2021 •  15 COMMENTS

Half a century after hippies gave psychedelics a bad name, psychiatrists are pressing to use the currently illegal drugs to treat mental illness.

Newcastle psychiatrist Stuart Saker is confident many of his patients could benefit from illegal drugs such as psilocybin (magic mushrooms) and MDMA and even has a trial planned for October that will test his hypothesis.

While he hopes his trial pool of 20 patients benefit, the broader hope is that by the end of the year all of his patients will be able to access the psychedelic drugs that could put their mental illness in remission.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration is reviewing a decision not to downgrade psilocybin and MDMA to allow for medical use and noted in the interim decision that there was emerging evidence of potential therapeutic benefit in the treatment of PTSD and depression.

St Vincent's hospital Melbourne is currently conducting a study on the use of psilocybin to treat anxiety in terminally ill patients and Monash University is also researching psilocybin for anxiety as well as MDMA for treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

A health department spokesman said the final decision had been deferred pending an independent expert review into the therapeutic value, risks, and benefits of psilocybin and MDMA for public health outcomes. The report is expected to be published in October and the TGA decision maker intends to seek additional advice from the Advisory Committee on Medicines Scheduling following the review.

For Dr Saker, a rescheduling of the drugs from class 9 to class 8 would have an immediate impact, with six of his patients already approved for the use of MDMA and psilocybin. He said

the TGA had been influenced by objections from the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, which he argued was concerned about protecting the reputation of the profession rather than exploring treatments trialled overseas with great effect, including remission rates of about 70 per cent.

“(The patients) have all tried almost everything else and they’re all really desperate people with very difficult to treat mental illnesses,” he said.

“We know that if you’ve taken two antidepressants then taken a third, your chance of getting better is 10 per cent, not very high. Cycling through antidepressants is a very futile process after you’ve tried a couple.”

RANZCP president Vinay Lakra said there was a way to go before psychedelics could be considered safe and effective. “The evidence ... is promising but the studies included small number of participants and have some methodological limitations,” Associate Professor Lakra said.

Mind Medicine Australia executive director Tania de Jong said she thought Australia was close to legalising the drugs for medical use with state and federal governments recognising the potential to get more patients well and out of the health system.

She said a rescheduling by the TGA would still require a permit and medical exemption system like with cannabis and, while trials were ongoing, research should never prevent patients who are very ill from having access to the drugs.

She said patients would never get to take the medicines home with all treatments taking place in clinical environments under the supervision of trained therapists.

Ms de Jong said trials had shown remission with just two to three medicinal treatments of psilocybin or MDMA combined with a short course of psychotherapy compared to life long use of antidepressants and side effects.

“As someone like myself, who has had to deal with depression, the antidepressants often have so many side effects, it’s extraordinarily difficult to find anything that’s going to be lasting and you’re taking so many pills and they cause significant side effects,” she said.

“It’s unethical to withhold these treatments from patients who are suffering.”

MMA board member and former federal trade Minister Andrew Robb said the drugs appeared to be producing extraordinary outcomes in overseas trials.

“It’s not just half a dozen trials, it’s over 160 trials ... probably more trials than what other drugs experience before they get to market,” he said.

He said it was “deeply frustrating” that hundreds of thousands may benefit to some extent but were being denied the opportunity, especially considering regulation of other drugs like morphine that would also be damaging if used recreationally.

“Hopefully this inquiry ... will lead to some commonsense,” he said.

“As someone like myself, who has had to deal with it, the antidepressants they often have so many side effects, it’s extraordinarily difficult to find anything that’s going to be lasting and you’re taking so many pills whether what side effects might be having on your system.”

TESSA AKERMAN, REPORTER

Tessa Akerman is a reporter with The Australian's Melbourne bureau where she covers general news. She previously worked for The Advertiser and The Daily Telegraph.

