


# Richard Nixon's 'war on drugs' claims casualties every day

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Psychedelics may have been used and abused by many hippies in the 1960s, but until banned in 1970 for crass political purposes psychedelics also held the promise of a remarkable impact in dealing with serious mental health conditions.

That promise of extraordinary outcomes is rekindled today by some august universities and hospitals around the world. Australia must step up: with increasing suicide rates and one in eight Australians — including one in four of our seniors — taking antidepressants, we need a game changer. Mental illness is a curse. It sucks the joy of life from you. It confronts you with false anxieties and meaningless, torturous agitation.

Nine years ago, I confronted my curse of 43 years, since the age of 12. For most of those years the stigma of mental health disease saw me do sad things to hide my demons. This is no different to hundreds of thousands of fellow Australians still today. Confronting my demons involved going public, and six months of trial and error looking for a medication to restore a more normal life without intolerable side-effects.

My persistence was well rewarded. I have had nine years of highly productive, highly responsible positions, many of these years as a member of the federal cabinet in our national parliament. I have enjoyed a freedom not known since childhood.

Yet little is known about why and how this medication gave me relief for nine years, and now why the same medication has stopped helping me. Sadly, I am back on the trial-and-error treadmill.

Despite the prevalence and impacts of mental health conditions, so little is known. The science has hardly progressed in decades. The stigma has much to answer for.

It is why a political act almost 50 years ago, which stopped in its tracks the study of psychedelics and their role in tackling very thorny mental health conditions, was such a crime.

In the 1950s and 1960s, psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy was regarded by psychiatrists as the next big breakthrough for treating mental illness and was used for tens of thousands of patients.

A total of 40,000 research papers was published between 1950 and 1972 documenting psychedelic-assisted treatments for depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and alcohol and other addictions.

Psychedelic agents have been used for thousands of years and in various contexts, from the medicinal to the ritualistic. Yet their use across the Western world was stopped by President Nixon's 1970 war on drugs, used to suppress the anti-war movement.

Psychedelic use was criminalised from 1970. All research funding stopped because psychedelics had become illegal substances. The Western world followed suit.

As a senior Nixon aide, John Ehrlichman, subsequently said: "The Nixon (presidency) ... had two enemies: the anti-war left and black people. You understand what I'm saying?"

"We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalising both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did."

Yet, here we are today, after 50 lost years, with phase-three medical trials under way in the US and Europe using MDMA-assisted therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder and psilocybin assisted therapy for treatment-resistant depression. Both therapies have been given breakthrough-therapy designation by the FDA in the US to fast-track the approval process, as earlier trials showed lasting impact and high remission rates; and because of the urgent need for new treatments.

It is why I have joined the board of Mind Medicine Australia, a recently registered charity that is working to develop evidence-based and regulated psychedelic-assisted treatments for mental illness in Australia.

The organisation has brought together some of the leading experts in mental health, ethics and psychedelic medicine in the world. Key aspects of MMA's strategy involve:

- Building awareness and educating health practitioners and all other stakeholders;
- Developing an Asia-Pacific centre of excellence in psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy based in Australia;
- A training program to ensure we have qualified therapists;
- Conducting research trials;
- Ensuring treatments are accessible to all.

In many areas of health we lead the world, but we are left behind when it comes to the most exciting prospective opportunity in mental health — the use of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy.

Australian regulators need to get the ball rolling to reclassify psychedelics from the most restrictive drug category to one that accommodates medicinal use. If it works, what have we got to lose?

*Andrew Robb is a former minister for trade and investment.*