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Andrew Robb tunes in to curative power of psychedelics

EXCLUSIVEBy **LUKE SLATTERY**9:12PM NOVEMBER 20, 2019 •  14 COMMENTS

When Andrew Robb began his political career three decades ago as Liberal Party deputy director, few would have foreseen that he would one day ally himself with 60s counterculture psychonaut Timothy “turn on, tune in, drop out” Leary. But it has come to pass.

Mr Robb, 68, who was minister for trade and investment under Malcolm Turnbull, on Thursday joins the board of Mind Medicine Australia, a body active in funding clinical research into the psychological benefits of medicinal psilocybin, the active ingredient in magic mushrooms and MDMA (a pure form of ecstasy).

A raft of reputable studies have shown these and other psychedelics, such as LSD, to be effective in treating severe depression and psychological trauma, as well as addiction.

Mr Robb, who has had a well-documented wrestle with depression, told The Australian he had been treated for the condition for the past nine years with an antidepressant medication that had suddenly ceased to work.

He was back in the “trial-and-error process”, looking for a replacement. In 2017-18, 26 million prescriptions for antidepressant medication were issued by Australian GPs. Mr Robb stressed that he had not turned to psychedelics for his condition for a simple reason: “they’re illegal”.

Psilocybin was banned in the US in 1968 and in 1971 was added to a list of drugs prohibited by the UN Convention on Psychotropic Substances. In Australia, it is classified as a Schedule 9 illicit drug.

But at St Vincent’s Hospital in Melbourne a trial is about to begin using psilocybin in concert with psychoanalysis to treat depression in terminally ill patients. The trial, the first of its kind

here, follows successful studies at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, New York University, and University College London. It is partly funded by Mind Medicine Australia.

“The thing about the trials under way is that people are not only seeing improvements in their condition, they’re seeing the condition fixed,” Mr Robb said.

“That’s really remarkable, especially for some of those really hardcore conditions where everyone’s at a loss as to what to do.

“I’m not aware of too many people with significant depression that find remission on existing legal therapies. They might find management, which in my case was much better than not — I did get relief.

“I don’t see any issue with a former conservative politician calling for something that might materially improve the lives of people who are really suffering and who science is unable to help.

“Science hasn’t moved on at all. You go and ask a psychiatrist what’s going on in my head they have absolutely no idea.”

Mind Medicine Australia chairman Peter Hunt stressed that MMA was seeking to “establish safe and effective psychedelic-assisted treatments for mental illness” and was not advocating the recreational use of psychedelics, MDMA, or other prohibited substances. “Nor do we advocate for any changes to the law with respect to recreational use,” he said. “Our focus is wholly clinical.”