

## OPINION

# Talking Point: LSD, ecstasy, shrooms can be medicine

**A new attitude to illicit drugs could have huge health benefits, says GREG BARNES.**

GREG BARNES, Mercury

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 A new attitude to illicit drugs could have huge health benefits, says Greg Barnes. Picture: ISTOCK

One of the most depressing aspects of the futile war on drugs is that it stopped advances in treatment of mental and physical illness.

Take LSD, MDMA and psilocybin, known as magic mushrooms. These are highly useful drugs, demonised by the prohibitionists, which are now playing a vital role in relieving chronic depression and PTSD.

Late last year a systematic review carried out by Silvia Muttoni and colleagues, and published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*, found that “psychedelics like ayahuasca, psilocybin and lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) are potential therapeutic options for patients that are not effectively managed by conventional treatment.” The study examined seven studies and concluded “classical psychedelics produced significant and sustained antidepressant and anxiolytic effects”, and importantly found that for patients psychedelic treatment “was well-tolerated with no persisting adverse effects; when occurring, the most common included transient anxiety, short-lived headaches, nausea and mild increases in heart rate and blood pressure.”

When it comes to MDMA or ecstasy as it is known, two recent studies show promising results. In a 2017 paper in *Neuroscience Letters* Ben Sessa from Imperial College London found that “[u]sed just two or three times, under careful medical supervision and specialised psychotherapy support MDMA appears to facilitate the recall of traumatic memories without the user feeling overwhelmed by the negative affect that usually accompanies such memories.” Two years later and a paper by Michael Mithoefer of the University of South Carolina and colleagues published in the journal *Psychopharmacology* found “MDMA-assisted psychotherapy was efficacious and well tolerated in a large sample of adults with PTSD.”

For cancer sufferers these drugs hold hope. A paper by Roland Griffiths of Johns Hopkins University in the US and colleagues published in 2016 in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology* found that psilocybin decreased clinician- and patient-rated depressed mood, anxiety and death anxiety, and increased quality of life, life meaning and optimism. Six months after the final session of treatment, about 80 per cent of 51 participants continued to show clinically significant decreases in depressed mood and anxiety as result of using a single large dose of psilocybin.

Mind Medicines Australia (disclaimer: this columnist is a member of the advisory panel) are pioneers in bringing this research and knowledge to this country. Headed by Peter Hunt, a former investment banker and Tania de Jong a soprano singer and businesswoman, MMA is focuses on clinical application of medicinal psilocybin and medicinal MDMA for some mental illness.

An important part of ensuring the myths about LSD, magic mushrooms and MDMA are reduced in the minds of a community that has been taught these drugs are evil, is education. MMA holds educational and outreach events and is active in the Australian media.

At Melbourne's St Vincent's Hospital MMA is funding a trial by Margaret Ross, a psychologist and her psychiatrist colleague Justin Dwyer. This trial is treating severe depression in terminally ill patients with psilocybin and psychotherapy sessions.

PTSD is another illness where psychedelic drugs are proving useful. There are about 800,000 cases in Australia and the tragic and widespread bushfire crisis over this summer means that number will rise. MDMA should be available as part of the suite of treatments.

In Tasmania there is an imperative to get involved in the rethinking of LSD, MDMA and magic mushrooms. In this state we have stubbornly high depression and PTSD rates and a very poor public mental health service.

Greg Barns is a Hobart barrister and social commentator.