DEA to outlaw hallucinogenic ‘ecstasy’ drug

A hallucinogenic drug used by some psychotherapists on their patients will be outlawed July 1, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) recently announced.

The drug, commonly known as “ecstasy,” has no accepted medical usage and has high abuse potential, the DEA says. A ban was necessary to avoid “imminent hazard to public safety,” said DEA Administrator John C. Lawn.

The drug, whose scientific name is 3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDMA), thus will join the ranks of heroin, cocaine, and LSD as a highly restricted Schedule I drug. Possession of a “trace” of MDMA will be punishable by up to 15 years in prison and a $125,000 fine.

The ban has rekindled the debate over the use of psychoactive drugs in therapy, silent since Congress passed the 1966 Drug Abuse Control Amendments. Physicians have a right to research the therapeutic potential of mind-altering drugs, MDMA supporters maintain.

THE EMERGENCY ban will be effective for only one year; hearings will be held this summer in Los Angeles; Kansas City, Mo.; and Washington, D.C., to determine whether the drug should be re-classified permanently.

Therapists using the drug on patients complain that the pre-emptive emergency ban makes the chance of conducting any further research difficult — perhaps impossible. The DEA, however, says it is establishing expedited registration procedures to assure that legitimate research can continue.

Although it is difficult to determine the exact extent of medical usage, therapists and laymen deny feelings are between 35 and 200 physicians are using the drug on patients.

“We are beginning increasingly to discover more and more about neurochemistry of the brain and develop chemicals that can modify the brain in important and subtle ways,” Charles Schuster of the U. of Chicago told The Washington Post.

“We’ve accepted drugs that are capable of relieving symptoms of mental disease. But there are going to be drugs that enhance our capabilities. Are we going to reject them, or use them in an intelligent fashion?” asked Schuster, who has conducted research on MDMA’s pharmacologic cousin MDA.

THE DRUG helps patients lower their defenses, making them more receptive to treatment, therapists assert. The patients and drug users report they start to feel “in touch” with themselves, explained psychiatrist Rick Ingrasci, MD, of Waterdown, Mass.

Some cancer patients have taken MDMA to relieve pain and prepare for imminent death. A patient of Santa Fe, N.M., psychiatrist George Greer, MD, said it suppressed feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, easing a life with inoperable bone marrow cancer.

Recreationally, it has been nicknamed “the yuppie psychedelic” because of its relatively mild psychoactive properties and popularity with students and young professionals. MDMA users say it makes them feel “warm,” “relaxed,” and “in touch with people.” “It’s the drug you want to do with your parents,” user Rick Dobin told one reporter.

There is peril in its use, however, the DEA counters. A survey of 300 hospitals nationwide found that there have been eight emergency room visits and two deaths from MDMA since 1979. One death — of a California psychoanalyst with a heart condition — occurred with a 200 mg. dose, well above the typical 50 mg. to 110 mg. dose.