New drug challenges cocaine
as the choice of yuppies

By Lynn Emmerman
and Jon Van

It is a shimmering white powder
that some think is the chemical
key to enlightenment. Taking it
stimulates the effect of years of
therapy, some psychologists say.
Users describe feeling intensely
peaceful and empathic.

But the federal government
maintains that MDMA is a dan-
gerous and virtually untested narcotic
that may irreversibly damage the
mind.

Despite the controversy, or per-
haps because of it, MDMA, also
known as “Ecstasy,” is becoming
increasingly popular with young
urban professionals and college
students in the West and along the
East Coast. The laboratory-pro-
duced drug has recently begun to
filter into cities across the country,
according to the federal Drug
Enforcement Administration.

“I think yuppies everywhere will
love ‘X-ing’ [taking Ecstasy]. It
gets you slightly high without
taking away your control. Yuppies
like that,” said a 32-year-old North
Side computer worker who has
taken the pill drug. Though Ec-
stasy is not readily available in
Chicago, she said, “It’s on its way.
Already, you can find it if you
know where to look.”

Frank Sapienza, a chemist with
the drug agency, cautiously echoed
her prediction. “Will MDMA re-
place cocaine as the drug of the
late ‘80s? It’s too soon to tell, but
it’s definitely possible,” he said.

Noting Ecstasy’s growing popu-
larity, the agency effectively ban-
ned the drug this month. As of
July 1, Ecstasy will be classified
as a Schedule I controlled sub-
stance, a category customarily re-
served for dangerous narcotics
that have a high potential for
abuse. The scheduling was an
emergency measure that will be
effective for a year, during
which public hearings will be held
to determine whether Ecstasy has
therapeutic value.

The drug agency acted after two
University of Chicago researchers
found that a drug similar to Ec-
stasy might work by destroy-
ing large numbers of vital brain
cells. Therapists who have taken
the drug and given it to patients, as
well as other professionals who
identify with “global conscious-
ness” and “romantic ecology” re-
miniscent of the 1960s, have
strongly protested the govern-
ment’s banning of Ecstasy. They
say the drug does everything from
breaking down barriers between
lovers to enhancing trust and ban-
ishing jealousy.

The Earth Metabolic Design
Foundation, a Berkeley think tank
is supporting several research pro-
jects on MDMA. Some of the
drug’s proponents have even re-
tained a New York-based law firm
to argue their case to the govern-
ment. Ecstasy also has support-
in the Midwest.

“MDMA is a very good drug,” said
June Riedlinger, 35, a phar-macist who lives in west subur-
ban Brookfield. “It helps people redic
their anxiety about what they fee
about problems in themselves an
interpersonal communication. Th
drugs good effects can last quite
long time.

“When I took it, I experienced
good enhancement of color and
sound. I felt very calm. I could see
my thoughts and conflicts in
positive light. My sense of peace
with the universe was exaggerated
slightly,”

Riedlinger said she learned

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about the drug from her former education psychology professor, Dr. Thomas Roberts of Northern Illinois University, who teaches a course in psychedelic research.

"I said Roberts, "People who take Ecstasy get along better in their family relations and are more aware of the aspect of love in their lives." Roberts described his encounter with MDMA as experiencing "an intense feeling of love in the brotherly sense, not the sexual arousal sense."

Unlike MDMA's more strident proponents, Roberts does not recommend the drug for street use. He thinks it should be used under close supervision as part of psychotherapy. "Realistically, you can't keep Ecstasy off the street. You have to encourage the proper use of it—for example, the proper dosage.

"Banning the drug just forces the manufacturers further underground and drives up the price. You're going to see a lot of street dealers selling all sorts of garbage to kids and telling them it's MDMA."

Roberts' beliefs about the spiritual benefits of Ecstasy are reminiscent of similar claims made about LSD in the 1950s and 1960s. But some of that drug's users experienced mental, emotional and chromosomal damage. Ecstasy's detractors say it may be just as dangerous.

At the Haight Ashbury Free Medical Clinic in San Francisco, workers have noted an influx of teenagers who take multiple doses of Ecstasy for a strong stimulant effect. "These kids are getting wired. They experience racing heartbeats, anxiety and delusions," said Rick Seymour, training director at the clinic.

Seymour said MDMA use is too new to detect patterns of addiction, let alone determine if the drug is addictive. "What we're seeing now is a fad. A drug like this really belongs to the research scientist and experienced physician," he added.

But all too often, Ecstasy is being handled by drug dealers, federal agents say. The sale of the drug is openly promoted in flyers and business cards circulated on the street in Texas and California.

"The cards say, 'Take Ecstasy, a great experience,'" Sapienza said. "In Texas, dealers are holding Ecstasy parties where for $25 you get one pill and a stack of literature urging you to distribute the drug. It's being falsely touted as a safe and legal euphoriant."

University of Chicago researchers recently made some disturbing discoveries about Ecstasy's possible effects. Doctors Charles Schuster and Lewis Seiden experimented with the effect of the drug MDA, which is chemically similar to MDMA. They found that the drug kills brain cells and actually may speed up the aging process. The effect of that brain-cell death may have no immediate effect, but it can be devastating as MDA users age and normal aging further depletes brain cells.

Another drug, methamphetamine, which also is chemically similar to Ecstasy, can cause a degeneration in the nerve cells responsible for body movement. Schuster and Seiden found.

Though it is not a new drug, almost no research has been conducted on Ecstasy. All but forgotten until its recent resurgence by underground chemists, Ecstasy was developed in 1914 as part of unsuccessful research to develop an appetite suppressant. It was unregulated by law until this year.

Evidence that MDMA was being abused for recreational use surfaced in the early 1970s. Sapienza said.

The drug is a little-known derivative of yohimbine or yohimbe bark. The letters MDMA stand for 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, a substance that is related to amphetamines, or "speed," and mescaline, which produces hallucinations.

MDMA is a designer drug, a laboratory produced "analog" that is developed by altering several molecules of another known narcotic. Designer-drug chemists create analogs to stay one step ahead of police. By slightly altering the chemical makeup of a drug, they create a substance that is not regulated by law. The danger in this practice lies in the chance that some of these new chemical creations can be Frankensteins with deadly side effects.

"Ecstasy clearly illustrates the problems of regulating analogs," Sapienza said. "Rumor is that since we outlawed MDMA, underground chemists have already come up with a new untainted drug. They call this one MDE."