BEYOND CRACK:

Stronger than heroin, more addictive than cocaine, synthetic opiates—many of them legal—are hooking doctors and

SPECIAL REPORT
HOW GOOD IS SOVIET SCIENCE?
STEPHEN JAY GOULD ON WHY THERE ARE NO MORE .400 HITTERS
AN ETHICAL QUANDARY: WHO SHOULD GET THE EXPERIMENTAL AIDS DRUG?
 MDMA: IS THERE EVER A JUSTIFIABLE REASON FOR GETTING HIGH?

MDMA—known to its users as ecstasy—is a designer drug of a different stripe. Structurally, it's related to stimulants and hallucinogens, amphetamines, but its effects are different from either. In addition to evoking the bypass that makes it a popular "club" drug among hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of young professionals, gays, and college students, MDMA appears to act as a kind of emotional and cognitive gear that produces insight. Some psychiatrists who gave the drug to patients when it was legal say they can accomplish in one MDMA therapy session the equivalent of up to a year of traditional treatment.

While these doctors think MDMA can be useful in clinical situations, its potential for abuse and the need for more information on its effects have led the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to restrict the sale of the substance in July 1985, until it could be evaluated further. The agency's final decision on the classification of MDMA, which is especially sensitive because of its recreational use, is likely to be one of the most controversial in recent years.

It is significant that because it concerns an issue larger than the fate of a single drug, the debate over whether MDMA is a benign or even useful psychedelic drug, how can these drugs be regulated in a way that curbs abuse but permits legitimate use? Further, does legitimate use mean that a person can only ethically take the drug when he's sick? A recent article by David Nichols, a professor of medicinal chemistry at Purdue, points to the plight of the chronically ill, who are often pacified with culturally acceptable sedatives that make them tractable but often further from their families and their own thoughts and feelings. They aren't permitted to use a drug like MDMA, that might provide them with a little clear-headed pleasure, augment their ability to reflect, and remember, to establish their rapport with others, and reduce pain.

"We have for some reason adopted the notion that chemically induced pleasure is a bad idea to try to be avoided at any cost," says Nichols. "But what sort of evil is it to provide some comfort or delight to the dying patient? We have no right to insist that some people must be made to feel completely at ease. Although this is a controversial opinion, Lester Grinspoon, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard, thinks MDMA may improve the efficacy of psychotherapy, and particularly the ability to express feelings. Doctors improve the symptoms of mental illness, but even in the context of psychotherapy, you say you know him pretty well," says Richard Ingerslev, a Boston psychiatrist who treated many MDMA cases, "but the patient may still be feeling a bit and don't feel able to express it. If you give him some MDMA, and suddenly you're hearing all kinds of stuff you haven't heard before. That's when the therapy really takes off." Ingerslev finds the drug a powerful tool in helping patients find trust and empathy in a marriage counseling setting. Some patients have reported that six of his patients were able to discuss things they never could have in a more traditional setting.

"If the patient is able to discuss sexuality, he can throw in whatever he wants," says David Smith, the director of the Haight-Ashbury Free Medical Clinic in San Francisco. They have an entirely different perspective from that of enforcement agencies, or from that of the FDA, which is the only drug manufacturer controlled by the DEA. But Smith says MDMA is a good drug that could be used safely and legally in a supervised setting, like psychotherapy. "We have in mind a benzene-supervised setting, like psychotherapy," says Smith. "It's like a benzene-supervised setting, like psychotherapy." Smith says MDMA is a good drug that could be used safely and legally in a supervised setting, like psychotherapy.