FDA allows human tests of love drug

Banned Ecstasy popular, but is labeled dangerous

By LYLE NOX,  M.D., Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES — FDA green lights the love drug, Ecstasy. College students call it the love drug, Federal regulators label it dangerous drug.

It's widely known as Ecstasy, a cousin to hallucinogens and amphetamines that are said to alter perceptions, well-being, and behavior. Named by the Food and Drug Administration in 1985, it has since been linked to a death and blamed for more than 250 deaths in a single year alone. Tests on animals have not shown it to be dangerous.

But a researcher at UCLA Medical School says there could be an epidemic of Ecstasy, which chemical name is 3,4-methylenedioxyethylamphetamine (MDMA for short). Charles Grob, a psychiatrist, has secured first-ever FDA approval for human testing of the drug.

The experiment is designed to lead to tests of Ecstasy as a possible painkiller for the terminally ill and for use in psychotherapy.

"Hundreds of thousands of young people have taken it," Grob said. "But we know very little about it. There's a lot of talk about potential dangers, but we want to explore it seriously.

Now, in the scientific community, are enthusiastic about MDMA's potential benefits. Many believe that it has potential for the treatment of psychological disorders, and that it is applicable to more than 1,000 conditions in humans.

"When LSD was first introduced, that same view of therapeutic use was popular, and it turned out to be completely wrong," said Dr. Stephen Sack, an LSD expert in the U.S. Army School of Medicine in Fort Washington.

Nevertheless, recent researchers who have found beneficial effects in MDMA animal models say they are confident of MDMA's potential for the treatment of a wide range of psychological disorders, including depression and anxiety, and that it is applicable to a broad range of conditions in humans.

"We need to get rid of the drug war mentality and see that drugs aren't all evil," said Dr. Richard Dobkin, a Purdue University researcher who tested MDA on rats in the early 1980s. MDMA was discovered virtually in 1

3rd Ecstasy on File

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ECSTASY

Possible painkiller for terminally ill

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roped by about 800 years ago, surfaced in Berkeley in the 1960s and hit the nightclub scene in the 1970s. It remains popular at "rave" parties in big cities, including Los Angeles and San Diego, and among college students.

Grob said the FDA approved his testing proposal after years of turning down similar ones. In the study's first phase, he will give Ecstasy to six health professionals who have previously used MDMA on their own. He'll then monitor their sleep patterns, conduct brain scans, and perform a variety of other medical tests.

He said he hopes to dispel some of the rumors about MDMA, heard on dance floors and campuses. Those include whispered reports that it drains spinal fluid and acts temporarily as an amphetamine, only to cause long-term impotence.

The second part of Grob's trial, which has yet to win FDA approval, will seek to determine whether Ecstasy causes pain in terminal cancer patients and helps them, as a psychotherapeutic agent, cope with the knowledge that they are going to die.

Grob said those applications are "way, way down the line. That's getting the cart before the horse."

But Richard Dobkin, an unabashed proponent of psychedelic drugs, said he hopes Grob's study will open the door to MDMA's use in treating patients who suffer from mental illnesses, are recovering from traumatic events, or just struggling with a marriage.

"I think MDMA has a significant place in the future of psychiatry and then in a liberalized world where adults have free choice for such kinds of experiences," Dobkin said from the North Carolina office of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, a group he founded.

MDMA was already popular among psychotherapists when the government outlawed it. Advocates say it allows people to lower psychological barriers between themselves and others and become less hostile.

College-aged people have more-proven uses for the drug. They often take it alone to dance all night or, in a highly dangerous practice, mix it with LSD, mariujana and alcohol.

Ecstasy users say that since 1985, the drug's quality has gone down and its price has jumped to $20 or more per capsule.

The Drug Enforcement Administration has blamed MDMA for 12 deaths in the United States, most stemming from heart failure and accidents. In one case, an Ecstasy user tried to climb a live electrical wire.

Deaths have also been reported at rave parties in England. Grob said those fatalities probably resulted from part from a lack of oxygen and water in the clubs. Some raves charge as much for water as alcohol, and turn off the taps in the bathrooms. Grob noted. Dancers experiencing Ecstasy's hours-long euphoria can become dehydrated and fall into seizures, he added.

Last year, 236 people were rushed to American emergency rooms because of bad reactions to Ecstasy.