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Examining the Use And Abuse of Ecstasy

By *Marsha Rosenbaum
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WE HEAR a lot about the drug Ecstasy of late. MDMA (its chemical name) has been around since 1914. But it was not actually used until the 1970s, when a small group of psychiatrists discovered the drug's ability to melt away patients' fears and defenses. It became useful in psychotherapy.

By the early 1980s, entrepreneurs coined the name "Ecstasy." MDMA crossed over from therapy to recreation. The open presence of "X" among young professionals — coupled with disturbing (though preliminary) research findings about possible brain changes — caused the Federal Drug Enforcement Administration in 1985 to ban MDMA for both medical and recreational use.

But Ecstasy never disappeared from the drug scene.

Its reputation as a "feel good," "love/hug" drug, and its continued use among affluent

young people has caused much concern and controversy.

Millions have tried MDMA, and government studies indicate that use among teenagers is growing faster than any other drug, nearly doubling in the past five years.

Use of Ecstasy in the gay community has grown. A culture of users who attend large dance parties known as "raves" has developed worldwide.

An adulterated market has emerged, making it impossible for users to know exactly what they are actually getting. Other drugs (such as PMA and DXM) look just like Ecstasy but have caused severe reactions in naive users.

The hot, stuffy environment at some raves has

overheated and dehydrated dancers, bringing about seizures or fainting.

Meanwhile, researchers remain concerned that even small amounts of MDMA can have long-term consequences for brain chemistry. As a response, the government launched a "Club Drugs" initiative to warn users about Ecstasy's dangers; politicians are calling for stricter penalties for manufacture, distribution and use, and raves are being closely scrutinized, or even shut down.

Resolution is far from imminent. Claims about risks and benefits of MDMA diverge widely, with proponents going so far as to call the drug "a penicillin for the soul" and detractors labeling it "the worst new drug to hit the streets since heroin."

Somewhere in between the extreme views are (1) scientists and physicians who believe MDMA to be less harmful than government officials have claimed; (2) those who wish to conduct research on both therapeutic and recreational use; (3) those who wish to simply reduce the harms associated with use, and (4) the millions of people who do not know what to believe.

In a first-of-its-kind "only in San Francisco" gathering, scientific researchers, clinical and public health professionals, government officials, patients, psychotherapists and "ravers" are meeting in the city today to discuss the history, medical uses, potential problems and culture of Ecstasy, with an eye toward proposing sound approaches and "harm-reduction" policies.

"The State of Ecstasy: Science, Medicine and Culture" conference is sponsored by the San Francisco Medical Society, the Lindesmith Center-Drug Policy Foundation, the University of California in San Francisco, the San Francisco Department of Public Health and the California Society of Addiction Medicine.

Marsha Rosenbaum, director of the San Francisco office of the Lindesmith Center-Drug Policy Foundation, is co-author (with Jerome E. Beck) of "Pursuit of Ecstasy: The MDMA Experience" (SUNY Press, 1994). Steve Heilig is director of public health and education at the San Francisco Medical Society. For information, check the Web at www.drug-policy.org, or call (415) 921-4987. The conference is being webcast at www.drugpolicy.org.

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