

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

TUESDAY, AUGUST 14, 2001

Ecstasy, science and politics

By Marsha Rosenbaum

"ECSTASY" SEEMS to be on the minds of everyone these days. This month, the Drug Abuse Warning Network reported more than 4,500 Ecstasy-related emergency room visits in 2000 — up 58 percent from 1999.

To boot, MDMA (Ecstasy's chemical name) topped this year's list of substances "increasing sharply" on the government's annual survey of high school students. More than 1 in 10 12th-graders have tried the euphoric drug.

Law enforcement is concerned, and in what was reported to be "the largest seizure in history," police in New York confiscated 1 million Ecstasy pills last month.

Raves, the large dance parties in which Ecstasy is used by some, have been deemed venues for drug use and sales, and a movement is under way to shut them down.

Politicians are again sounding tough on drugs by proposing ever-increasing penalties for sales as well as possession of Ecstasy. On July 19, U.S. Sen. Bob Graham, D-Fla., introduced the "Ecstasy Prevention Act of 2001," and just this month, Illinois Gov. George H. Ryan signed into law one of the nation's harshest laws. A person convicted of possessing 15 Ecstasy pills in Illinois will receive a mandatory minimum sentence of four years in prison.

Scientists are concerned about Ecstasy, too.

Recently, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) hosted a conference presenting the latest research on Ecstasy's physiological and psychological effects.

As a parent, I wonder whether all the expression of concern by law enforcement, politicians and even scientists is really helping.

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If history is any guide, increased drug seizures will make little dent in the supply of Ecstasy. It is cheap to make and relatively easy to import.

The motive for profit will ensure that manufacturers will find ways to outsmart Customs and the Drug Enforcement Administration, as was illustrated so brilliantly in the Hollywood movie, "Traffic."

The attempt to close raves will not curtail young people's desire to get together and dance. Instead, parties will be driven underground and efforts to ensure safety (like having health professionals on hand) will be compromised. Increased penalties for possession and sales will do little to deter the use of Ecstasy.

Instead, we will see an affirmative action of sorts, with a larger proportion of white men and women adding to the expansion of our burgeoning black and brown prison population.

I attended last month's National Institute on Drug Abuse conference, hoping to get answers to troubling questions about the effects of Ecstasy.

Claims of brain damage that fuel the government's "Just Say No" message dominated, but the bulk of evidence at the conference produced far more questions than answers.

The single most consistent message coming out of the research was that we need much more research.

We surely need more research about Ecstasy's long-term effects on the brain, but evidence present-

ed at the conference also revealed that experts know plenty about MDMA's immediate effects.

I heard researchers talk about the negative consequences of overheating, dehydration, combining drugs and "fake" Ecstasy.

Scientists know how Ecstasy users can lessen these risks:

- They can "chill out" periodically,
- Drink water,
- Test pills to be sure they do not contain dangerous adulterants,
- Avoid combining MDMA with other drugs,
- And use moderation in dose level and frequency of use.

No such recommendations were made at NIDA's conference.

Scientists have instead been silent about harm reduction. It's "Just Say No" or nothing at all.

Facing ostracism and loss of research funding, scientists are, in practical terms, prevented from making safety-oriented recommendations. Instead, political interests that mandate abstinence determine which "findings" are to be disseminated.

As a parent, I take issue with researchers' refusal to reveal everything that is known about MDMA.

If our government is truly concerned about young people, it will dispense with rhetoric and give them the information they need to stay safe.

Marsha Rosenbaum directs the San Francisco office of the Lindesmith Center-Drug Policy Foundation (www.drugpolicy.org). She co-authored "Pursuit of Ecstasy: The MDMA Experience," in 1994 and wrote "Safety First: A Reality-Based Approach to Teens, Drugs and Drug Education" in 1999.