

THURSDAY  
AUGUST 9, 2001

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## Telling our children what we know about Ecstasy

By Marsha Rosenbaum

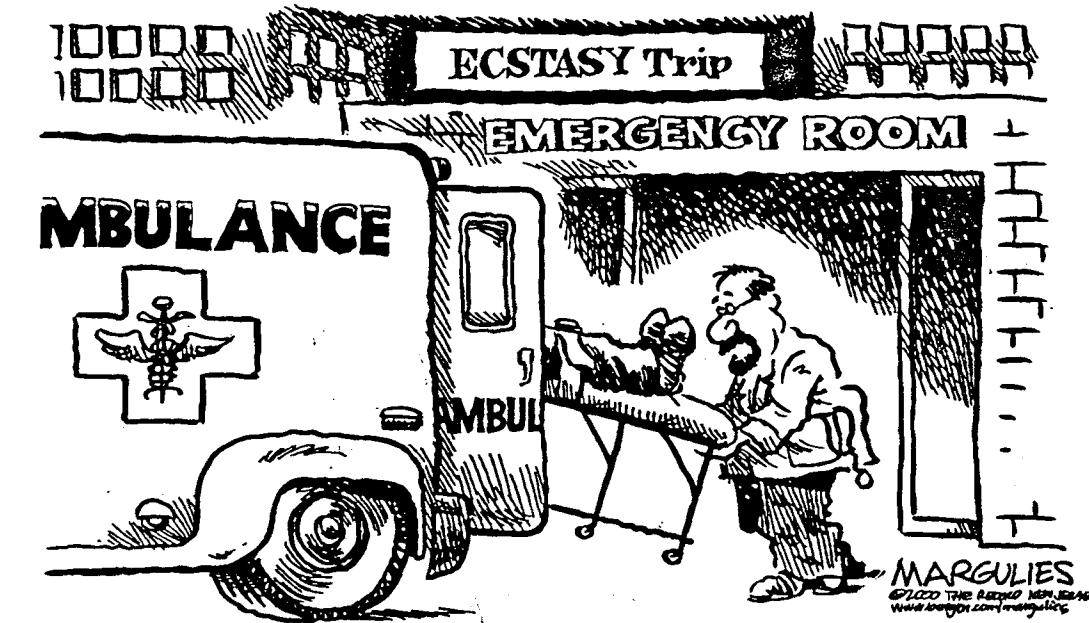
Ecstasy seems to be on the minds of everyone these days. The euphoric drug topped this year's list of substances "increasing sharply" on the government's annual survey. More than one in 10 high school seniors has tried it, and MDMA (the chemical name for Ecstasy) is now being used by young people of all racial and ethnic groups. Last week the Drug Abuse Warning Network reported over 4,500 Ecstasy-related emergency room visits in 2000, up 58 percent from 1999.

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 earlier this 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 declare them illegal.

Politicians are concerned, and are again sounding tough on drugs by proposing ever-increasing penalties for sales as well as possession of Ecstasy. Last week, Senator Bob Graham, D-Fla., introduced legislation to combat the drug, which will add to state initiatives that have been passed over the past year.

Scientists are concerned, too. Recently the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) hosted an international

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conference featuring presentations on the latest research breakthroughs about Ecstasy's physiological and psychological effects.

As a parent, I am concerned first and foremost about health and safety, but I wonder whether all the expression of concern by law enforcement, politicians and even scientists is really helping.

If history is any guide, increased drug seizures will do little to make a 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 Academy Award-winning movie, "Traffic."

The attempt to shut down 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 young men and women adding to the expansion of our burgeoning black and brown prison population.

I attended the recent National Institute on Drug Abuse conference, hoping to get answers to nagging questions about the long- and short-term effects of Ecstasy. Claims of brain damage that fuel the government's

"just say no" message dominated. The challenge, conference organizers argued, was to "get the word out" to Ecstasy users, who were certainly unaware of its risks.

Were they kidding? This generation of DARE graduates has heard such warnings about a variety of drugs, including Ecstasy, since they were in grade school. Because the messages are inconsistent with their observations and experiences, they feel duped and simply tune them out.

The bulk of evidence presented 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 to determine what this drug really does, for how

long, and what that means in functional terms, for those who use it.

We surely need more research about Ecstasy's long-term effects on the brain, but evidence presented at the conference also revealed that experts know plenty about MDMA's immediate effects. Here's where my ears perked up, because young people are clamoring for, and listening to recommendations for reducing immediate harm. No one wants to end up in the emergency room.

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. No wonder, because they face ostracism and loss of research funding if they dare engage in such a discussion. It's "just say no" or nothing at all. Scientists are, in practical terms, prevented from making safety-oriented recommendations by political interests that mandate abstinence at the expense of knowledge.

As a parent, I take issue with NIDA's refusal to reveal everything that is known about MDMA. If our government is truly concerned about young (and older) people who use Ecstasy, it will dispense with rhetoric and give its young people the information they desperately need to stay safe. And the sooner the better.