A brief history of psychedelic psychiatry

Moheb Costandi considers attempts to use hallucinogenic drugs to treat alcoholism and mental disorder

On 5 May 1953 the novelist Aldous Huxley dissolved four-tenths of a gram of mescaline in a glass of water, drank it, then sat back and waited for the drug to take effect. Huxley consumed the drug in his California home under the direct supervision of psychiatrist Humphry Osmond, to whom Huxley had volunteered himself as ‘a willing and eager guinea pig’. Osmond was one of a small group of psychiatrists who pioneered the use of LSD as a treatment for alcoholism and various mental disorders in the early 1950s. He coined the term psychedelic, meaning ‘mind manifesting’ and although his research into the therapeutic potential of LSD produced promising initial results, it was abruptly halted in the following decade as part of the backlash against the hippy counterculture.

Osmond was born in Surrey in 1917, and studied medicine at Guy’s Hospital, London. He served in the Royal Navy as a ship’s psychiatrist during World War II, and afterwards worked in the psychiatric unit at St George’s Hospital, London, where he became a senior registrar. While at St George’s, Osmond and his colleague John Smythies learned about Albert Hoffman’s synthesis of LSD at the Sandoz Pharmaceutical Company in Basle, Switzerland. Osmond and Smythies started their own investigation into the properties of hallucinogens and observed that mescaline produced effects similar to the symptoms of schizophrenia, and that its chemical structure was very similar to that of the hormone and neurotransmitter adrenaline. This led them to postulate that schizophrenia was caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. These ideas were not favourably received by their colleagues.

In 1951 Osmond took a post as deputy director of psychiatry at the Weyburn Mental Hospital in Saskatchewan, Canada and moved there with his family. Within a year, he began collaborating on experiments using LSD with Albert Hofler. Osmond conducted experiments on himself with LSD and concluded that the drug could produce profound changes in consciousness. Osmond and Hofler also recruited volunteers to take LSD and theorised that the drug was capable of inducing a new level of self-awareness that may have enormous therapeutic potential.

In 1953 they began administering LSD to their patients, starting with some of those diagnosed with alcoholism. Their first study involved two alcoholic patients, each of whom was given a single 200-milligram dose of the drug. One of them stopped drinking immediately after the experiment, whereas the other stopped six months later. Several years later, a colleague named Colin Smyth treated another 24 patients with LSD, and subsequently reported that 12 of them had either ‘improved’ or ‘well improved’ as a result of the treatment. ‘The impression was gained that the drugs are a useful adjunct to psychotherapy’, Smith wrote in a 1958 paper describing the study. ‘The results appear sufficiently encouraging to merit more extensive, and preferably controlled, trials.’

Osmond and Hofler were encouraged, and continued to administer the drug to alcoholics. By the end of the 1960s, they had treated approximately 2000 patients. Osmond and Hofler claimed that the Saskatchewan trials consistently produced the same results – their studies seemed to show that a single large dose of LSD could be an effective treatment for alcoholism, and reported that between 40 and 45 per cent of their patients had undergone a relapse after a year.

At around the same time another psychiatrist was carrying out similar experiments in the UK. Ronald Sandison was born in Shetland and won a scholarship to study medicine at King’s College Hospital. In 1951 he accepted further studies of the therapeutic value of lysergic acid diethylamide in mental illness. Journal of Mental Science, 163, 322–343.


bibliography


The research soon came to an abrupt halt ... mostly for political reasons

...and of how the brain works. Eventually, allowing researchers to investigate these drugs could not only reveal their true therapeutic potential, but could also help them to gain a better understanding of how they produce their effects, and of how the brain works.