

EXTRACT



It's a big week for MDMA

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April 17, 2017: 4:38 PM CT

Highlights:

- U.S. Sentencing Commission holds MDMA hearing
- Dr. Bronner's pledges \$5 million toward FDA approval for MDMA
- Psychedelic Science Conference kicks off in Oakland, California



(Photo credit: U.S. Customs/Newsmakers)

The U.S. Sentencing Commission (USSC) is slated to hear expert testimony about the chemical structures, pharmacological effects, trafficking patterns and community impacts of MDMA ("Ecstasy") and several synthetic psychoactive substances in a public hearing scheduled for Tuesday, Apr. 18.

This is the first time in 16 years the USSC will review MDMA sentencing guidelines, according to the nonprofit Multidisciplinary Association for the Psychedelic Studies

(MAPS).

MAPS founder and executive director Rick Doblin is among the experts scheduled to testify before the USSC. Doblin testified at a similar hearing in 2001. He told the Sentencing Commission that many risks associated with MDMA were inaccurate and heavily exaggerated, and he cautioned against passing stiffer penalties for the drug, which would stymie legitimate scientific research.

Despite Doblin's testimony in 2001, the USSC opted to increase mandatory minimum sentences for the drug, making MDMA penalties 500 times stiffer than marijuana penalties.

The move led to a 115 percent increase in MDMA-related prison sentences between 2001 and 2011, according to a 2011 report by Belmont Law Review.

Doblin says he is "encouraged" the Sentencing Commission is conducting another review into "the excessive penalties for MDMA," and he hopes his testimony on Tuesday will be more effective than it was back in 2001.

"Based on a comprehensive review of peer-reviewed scientific research into the risks of MDMA published since the sentencing guidelines were increased in 2001, MAPS' studies of the therapeutic potential of MDMA, and hundreds of anecdotes of self-healing from non-medical users of MDMA, it is abundantly clear that MDMA sentencing is egregiously disproportionate to its potential harms," he said.

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) placed MDMA into Schedule I – the most restrictive of all drug schedules – in 1985.

At the time, the DEA announced it was taking emergency action to ban the drug commonly known as "Ecstasy" because abuse of the drug had become a nationwide problem, The New York Times reported.

"All of the evidence [the] D.E.A. has received shows that MDMA abuse has become a nationwide problem and that it poses a serious health threat," John C. Lawn, the acting DEA administrator said at the time.

The DEA defines Schedule I drugs as substances or chemicals "with no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse." Heroin, LSD, marijuana, MDMA and psilocybin are a few of the Schedule I drugs.

The nonprofit Drug Policy Alliance criticized the DEA's move to classify MDMA as a Schedule I substance in the first place, saying it "blatantly ignored that it [MDMA] has been used successfully in psychotherapy for years."

"There's a growing consensus it's time to drastically reduce the role of criminalization when it comes to MDMA and other psychoactive substances," Stefanie Jones, director of audience engagement at the Drug Policy Alliance (DPA), said in a release.

DPA submitted public comment to USSC ahead of Tuesday's hearing, warning the commission against increasing criminal sentences for people who use or sell psychoactive substances like MDMA.

"We need all those who care about public health and criminal justice reform to raise their voices during this review process," Jones said. "It's long past time to right the wrongs of MDMA criminalization – and to ensure we don't repeat the same errors when it comes to other substances."

The Sentencing Commission laid out its intentions to review MDMA sentencing guidelines in its list of policy priorities for the amendment cycle ending on May 1, 2017.

According to the Federal Register Notice of Final 2017 Priorities, the Sentencing Commission intends to study "offenses involving MDMA/Ecstasy, synthetic cannabinoids, and synthetic cathinones," and consider "any amendments to the Guidelines Manual that may be appropriate in light of the information obtained from such study."

DPA points to a couple high-profile federal cases that might be driving the Sentencing Commission's review, including a 2011 case in which the American Civil Liberties Union successfully argued that federal sentencing guidelines for MDMA were based on outdated science. A federal judge agreed and rejected the federal MDMA sentencing guideline, saying it was based on "selective and incomplete" evidence and was not scientifically justified.

Recent years have seen a resurgence of scientific research into the medical uses of MDMA, particularly into MDMA-assisted psychotherapy.

MAPS is spearheading a \$25 million effort to make MDMA an FDA-approved prescription medicine by 2021. The organization is currently funding clinical trials to study MDMA-assisted psychotherapy for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

According to MAPS:

"Preliminary studies have shown that MDMA in conjunction with psychotherapy can help people overcome PTSD, and possibly other disorders as well. MDMA is known for increasing feelings of trust and compassion towards others, which could make an ideal adjunct to psychotherapy for PTSD."

On Tuesday, April 17, the popular organic soap company Dr. Bronner's pledged \$5 million to help MAPS' effort to gain FDA approval for MDMA medicine. The announcement came after the FDA approved MAPS' Phase 3 drug trials of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy for PTSD.

"There is tremendous suffering and pain that the responsible integration of MDMA for treatment-resistant PTSD will alleviate and heal," David Bronner, Dr. Bronner's Cosmic Engagement Officer (CEO), said in a release. "To help inspire our allies to close the funding gap, my family has pledged \$1 million a year for five years—\$5 million total—by far our largest gift to an NGO partner to date."

On Wednesday, April 19, just one day after the USSC's scheduled hearing on MDMA sentencing guidelines, the 2017 Psychedelic Science Conference presented by MAPS and the Beckley Foundation kicks off in Oakland, California.

The conference features workshops and presentations exploring new research into the therapeutic benefits and risks of MDMA, LSD, psilocybin, ayahuasca, ketamine, ibogaine, medical marijuana and more.

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