

DISTURBED PATIENTS SHOW DANGERS OF LSD ABUSE

Unsupervised 'experiments' can cause panic and psychosis

New evidence of the grave risks run by persons who take LSD without supervision has been reported by three psychiatrists at New York University School of Medicine. They emphasize that *d*-lysergic acid diethylamide may be especially dangerous to anxiety-ridden patients who take the widely publicized drug in the hope of achieving personality change without going through the trouble and expense of psychotherapy.

The investigators' attention was drawn to the problem by an "upsurge" of 27 patients, admitted to the Bellevue Psychiatric Unit in New York between March and June of last year for adverse reactions to LSD. A detailed work-up on the first dozen of these patients showed that the drug can bring about panic reactions, recurrence of drug symptoms without reingestion, and prolonged psychosis.

All of the 12 patients had some degree of personality difficulty before taking LSD, reports Dr. Marvin Stern, who directed the study. Five patients were "definitely psychotic" before their LSD experience, and all but one had been experimenting with barbiturates, amphetamine, alcohol, or marijuana in an effort to alleviate anxiety. Except for one patient aged over 30, all were in their 20s, says Dr. Stern. Most were "deeply concerned with philosophical questions and particularly interested in Zen Buddhism and Yoga," reports Dr. Stern in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

"LSD appeared to offer a new hope to them because it promised more than narcotization. They believed that in the height of the experience new self-understanding would be found."

What Dr. Stern and his colleagues, Drs. William A. Frosch and Edwin S.

Robbins, found, however, was that in each of the 12 anxiety-driven patients, LSD caused eruption of a new clinical syndrome or a new version of an old syndrome. No evidence of a personality change for the better was found in any case.

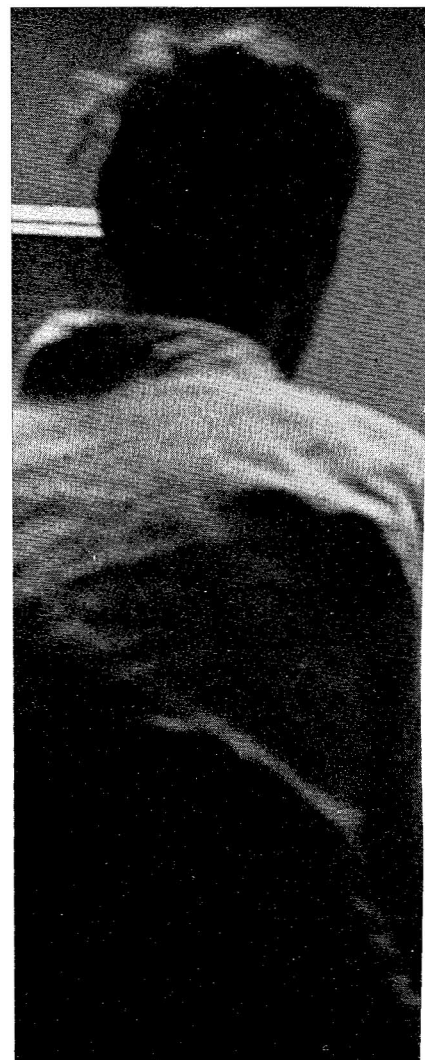
Four patients took the drug alone in their apartments and then came to the hospital seeking relief from their reaction of terror. Another two were brought in by friends who felt they could not control the patient or prevent him from hurting himself. A seventh was admitted after he fell from an open window.

Adverse Reactions Described

All the patients who suffered panic reactions upon taking the drug for the first time were classified as "overly ideational, obsessive, constricted, and stereotyped in responses to people and new situations." The underlying conditions diagnosed by the NYU team ranged from personality disorder to schizophrenia.

Recovery from panic was rapid, and all were discharged from the hospital in one to three days. Dr. Stern points out, however, that there is still no information on the possible long-range effects of these intense panic states. And a person in a panic state after taking LSD in an uncontrolled setting may run a particularly high risk of injury when the drug leads him to believe himself invulnerable to physical harm.

Three of the patients had recurrent experiences after they stopped taking LSD. They correlated the return of such symptoms as depersonalization and perceptual distortion with stress or anxiety. Two of these persons were diagnosed as having chronic schizo-



phrenia and the third patient was classified as "borderline."

The three patients in whom an extended psychosis followed a single dose of LSD clearly had long-standing schizophrenia. In the isolation of the "transcendental state" caused by the drug, they believed that they had resolved their problems and achieved a "new self." As the effects of the drug wore off, they were faced with the problem of returning to the real world and "accommodating a vague new self-image to reality," says Dr. Stern. "Rather than give up their new-found, fictional sense of self, they withdrew from the world."

At the time of admission, two were catatonic and the third, who had catatonic features, was markedly paranoid. Two were discharged after a month in



Photo collage was made by artist who had "psychedelic experience." LSD users say it captures the look of their hallucinations.

Dr. Stern (second from left) stresses that drug is most risky for anxiety-ridden people who hope it will "improve" personality.

the hospital, but the third had to be transferred to another hospital for prolonged treatment.

These patients are not typical of all those attracted to the LSD experience, Dr. Stern acknowledges. Their reactions to the drug may be more severe than the average. Furthermore, adverse reactions may occasionally occur even in a controlled setting. But in a therapeutic setting, the investigator can eliminate from his study subjects with potential psychotic tendencies. And if a panic reaction occurs, the investigator can interrupt the experiment and administer a barbiturate or other drug to alleviate panic.

"Abuse" of LSD does not mean addiction, since there is no physiologic dependence. But the drug's increased availability for self-experimentation

makes excessive dosage another major risk. Since early investigators produced what may have been "psychedelic" experiences with 30 μ g, the "normal" dose has risen to 200 μ g to 400 μ g, says Dr. Stern, and this is sometimes increased by persons experimenting on their own.

"Tolerance to LSD develops rapidly and tempts the user to increase the dosage to maintain the high level of the first experience. LSD is highly toxic, and even a slight increase may cause delirium. Depersonalization in the nonpsychotic subject may become as striking as that seen in acute schizophrenia. And these reactions may not be reversible."

Although the risks of LSD are mentioned in popular literature, Dr. Stern adds, "they are readily minimized by

someone who is intent on obtaining the highly touted positive effects, especially when any resultant psychosis is pictured as readily reversible, and even a step to health." The Bellevue psychiatrist cites a metaphor used by leading popularizers of the psychedelic experience: "It becomes necessary for us to go out of our minds in order to use our heads."

The promise of beneficial effects from the LSD experience, says Dr. Stern, is reminiscent of the optimism that accompanied the introduction of cocaine and heroin. "Initially, only the beneficial effects of these drugs were seen; it took more experience before their undesirable properties were recognized. It is now becoming apparent that abuse of LSD by the general population has unfortunate sequelae." ■