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ADDICTION

LSD vs. alcoholism

Conflicting evidence clouds a once-promising treatment

by Patricia McBroom

For several years it has seemed that LSD might be a godsend to the treatment of alcoholism. With so many alcoholics needing help, a drug that could, in one or two doses, produce enough personal insight to push a patient toward recovery would be of immeasurable help.

Reports from a Canadian hospital were most encouraging. Then the Spring Grove State Hospital in Baltimore came up with equally dramatic results, later duplicated in a Veterans' Administration study (SN: 4/15/67, p. 352).

But these positive results with the hallucinogen have now been matched by equally negative results from other researchers. LSD itself, they find, is apparently of little use.

The contrasting reports turned up in Boston recently at the annual meeting of American psychiatrists where Dr. Arnold M. Ludwig of the Mendota State Hospital in Madison, Wis., stated he is "forced to conclude from study of 176 alcoholics that LSD is no more effective" than traditional methods.

Dr. Ludwig admits to disappointment. It would have been gratifying to report significant gains, he says, but "unfortunately, our conscious wishes must yield to the overwhelming evidence that none of the LSD treatments" work better than a hospital's normal methods of handling alcoholics. By the end of one year after treatment, 80 to 90 percent of the patients had fallen off the wagon, says Dr. Ludwig.

The three-year study, supported by the National Institute of Mental Health, employed several combinations of drug therapy: LSD plus hypnosis and psychotherapy, LSD plus psychotherapy and LSD alone, in addition to conventional treatment in which alcoholics are asked to sit down and make an honest assessment of themselves. During their 30-day stay in the hospital, all patients had an opportunity to enter group therapy.

Alcoholics do benefit from these treatments, says Dr. Ludwig; a year later they continue to show gains in behavior, personality and drinking habits, despite the fact that most are off the wagon. But no one treatment was better than another, he says.

Maryland's Dr. Albert A. Kurland, a leading advocate of LSD therapy for alcoholics, offers contrasting evidence

on 122 patients currently under study at the Spring Grove State Hospital. Of 48 patients now past the year-and-a-half mark, 18 are rehabilitated and show "good attainment and adjustment in all areas" including drinking, occupation, residence and personal relations.

Dr. Kurland, director of the Maryland State Psychiatric Research Center, says that for some kinds of patients, recovery rate is much higher. The alcoholics were divided into three groups depending on the strength of their reaction to LSD. Fully 44 percent of the alcoholics had almost no psychedelic experience with the drug of which some had taken very low doses. Others had marked or profound experiences. Among those with a profound reaction, 58 percent show continued rehabilitation after 18 months, says Dr. Kurland. Only 21 percent of the non-reacting group show such recovery.

Dr. Kurland warns that use of the drug requires special skills in the therapist. Like the scalpel, LSD is merely a dangerous instrument without a skillful doctor to employ it.

Therein lies the critical unknown factor in LSD studies: The kind and quality of the human relationship between doctor and patient.

Dr. Ruth Fox, head of the National Council on Alcoholism, says she believes that Spring Grove therapists have more rapport with their patients than they admit. The center uses LSD within an intensive psychotherapy program which many experts on alcoholism believe causes the dramatic results ascribed to LSD.

Dr. Fox points to her own experience with LSD therapy seven years ago in illustration. Enthusiasm for the drug was at its height. Dr. Fox herself was enthusiastic. She chose 20 of her most hopeless, uncooperative alcoholics and "gave them a very nice experience" with LSD. Months of psychotherapy followed.

Three years later, 11 of the 20 had "improved quite remarkably," says Dr. Fox. "But they do not attribute their improvement to LSD and neither do I." She believes the LSD session was simply an episode in their lives that broke through resistance to psychiatric help.

"Something happened that day," says Dr. Fox, but she does not know whether it was attentive support for eight hours, the drug itself—or just the day.