



## Ecstasy could hold key to effective treatment of PTSD

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A novel therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) derived from the drug Ecstasy has demonstrated clinically significant recovery rates, a trial in Switzerland has shown.

Researchers in Switzerland gave 12 treatment-resistant PTSD sufferers a controlled dose of MDMA: an active ingredient of the drug Ecstasy. According to a paper on the trial, published in the 'Journal of Psychopharmacology' on 1 January, "there was clinically and statistically significant self-reported [PDS] improvement [in relation to PTSD symptoms]".

Lead researcher Michael Mithoefer MD explained that MDMA seems to help people revisit their core trauma when previously they found too painful to do so. "MDMA seems to be an entactogen," he told *IHS Jane's*. "People can revisit their trauma more easily; they have a greater window of tolerance to face issues they could not without the drug."

Many US veterans may have PTSD - up to 20% by one estimate, according to the US National Institute of Health - while the Pentagon also revealed this month that more US troops committed suicide last year than were killed in action in Afghanistan: 349 active-duty personnel killed themselves in 2012 - up more than 15% from 2011 - compared with 237 killed in action. The loss of US personnel through suicide in 2012 even exceeded the total of 313 killed in support of Afghan operations as a whole, where deaths outside the country are included.

A successful, low-cost treatment for PTSD could thus give sufferers and the military alike grounds for optimism, given that the costs of PTSD to military budgets can be huge. It has been estimated that treatment for a veteran can be as much as USD1.6 million in their lifetime. Finding a way to return personnel to active duty would save significant resources, not to mention the human cost of replacing experienced veterans with green recruits and leaving personnel with debilitating mental issues long after their active service.

"We estimate that a single course of therapy could cost around USD15,000, covered by insurance and/or government healthcare for soldiers," said a spokesman for the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), based in Santa Cruz, California. "That's 1% of the VA's costs of treating a veteran with PTSD over his or her lifetime."

MDMA was originally developed as a psychotherapeutic tool; research into the drug has been renewed by MAPS over the last five years. Phase II clinical trials are taking place in three other countries, with Canada and Australia awaiting approval.

The Swiss findings repeat previous research. In the United States a three-year follow-up study on a 2009 Proof of Principle trial was published in the 'Journal of Psychopharmacology' in 2012 and stated: "On average, subjects maintained statistically and clinically significant gains in symptom relief, although two of these subjects did relapse."

The authors of the US study further observed: "It was promising that we found the majority of these subjects with previously severe PTSD who were unresponsive to existing treatments had symptomatic relief provided by MDMA-assisted psychotherapy that persisted over time."

