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Summit 2023
9-11 October

Melbourne, Australia & Online



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#113 - “We don’t want to run before we walk”: Stakeholder attitudes towards using Psychedelics for mental health conditions

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Objectives/aims

The burden of mental health conditions in Australia is overwhelming on a personal and economic level. Conventional pharmacological treatments for mental health conditions, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, are reported to only have small effect sizes. New treatment methods are needed.

The evidence-base supporting the use of psychedelic therapies such as psilocybin- and 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA)-assisted psychotherapy appears strong, albeit needing further research. Psychedelics are often stigmatised due to their negative history, specifically the history related to the ‘War on Drugs’ (a continued effort seen in the USA since the era of President Nixon [circa June 1971]) aiming to penalise people using such agents. In a surprise move on February 4, 2023, Australia’s Therapeutic Goods Administration reclassified MDMA and psilocybin from schedule 9 (prohibited substances) to schedule 8 (controlled substances), approving their clinical use for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder and treatment-resistant depression (respectively), in conjunction with psychotherapy, from July 1, 2023. Although reclassifying is an important step towards including psychedelics in treatment regimes, the success of any innovation requires the support of those who might be impacted by it, including those who manage and deliver it.

The aim of this study was to understand the attitudes and positions of key Australian organisational and political stakeholders towards using psychedelics in medically supervised environments to treat mental health conditions. Understanding attitudes



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is necessary to support the future design and implementation of new policies and programs that are needed to guide the roll out of psychedelic therapies in Australia.

Methods

We conducted 13 semi-structured interviews; four with Australian politicians and nine with representatives of key stakeholder organisations such as medical or psychological peak bodies, healthcare service providers and advocates, unions and consumer bodies. Participants were recruited through professional networks, cold calling and snowballing. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were conducted using video conferencing and phone between September 2022 and January 2023, which was before the reclassification. The interview guide was informed by relevant literature and took an interpretive approach. Each representative was asked to comment on the position of their organization or political party during interviews, as opposed to sharing their own views. Data analyses were completed using pattern-based inductive thematic analysis. Ethics approval was gained from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (ID: 30009).

Main findings

Three major themes related to stakeholders' attitudes and positions towards using psychedelics clinically were identified in the data, including: 1) More research is needed; 2) Negative stigma impedes progression; and 3) Effective messaging is needed to inform positions. Participants were cautiously optimistic about the use of psychedelics to treat mental health conditions, with hesitancy emerging from the perceived inadequacy of research into the efficacy and feasibility of these treatments. Politicians consistently mentioned that negative stigma associated with psychedelics accumulated over several years prevented them and their peers from supporting the use of psychedelics in Australia. Effective, evidence-based and clear messaging that refutes misconceptions, provides clear information and uses personal stories and trusted entities to share messages, such as doctors and scientists, is needed.