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“Ecstasy” used to treat Swiss trauma victims

MDMA, otherwise known as ecstasy, is being given to patients suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as part of a clinical study in Switzerland. It is the first time that the illegal drug, which has been linked to a number of deaths, has been approved for research on a group of patients by the Swiss authorities.

A dozen trauma victims are expected to take part in the study, which began in October last year and is due to finish in 2008. One patient has completed the treatment; two more have been enrolled and will receive MDMA-assisted psychotherapy shortly. The Swiss trial is running parallel to a similar study being carried out by researchers in the United States.

It took over a year to gain approval from Swissmedic, the Swiss Agency for Therapeutic Products, an ethics committee and the Federal Health Office. Clearance finally came through in August last year.

Those selected for the trial must be over 18, they must have been diagnosed with PTSD and they must not have used ecstasy more than five times or within the previous six months. They also have to speak German.

Eight of them will get a full dose of MDMA – 125mg with a booster after two-and-a-half hours of 62.5mg – and four will receive a smaller dose during the three experimental sessions that each patient will undergo. The effects of the drug last several hours.

The full dose will produce a change of consciousness, a feeling of wellbeing, reduction of fear and help them face up to the very difficult feelings associated with trauma, such as anxiety. The trial is being sponsored by the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) and will cost more than SFr190'000.

The US non-profit organisation has a five-year goal to make MDMA into a prescription medicine for the treatment of PTSD. Researchers faced a tough task in gaining respectability for the drug after a considerable number of negative headlines over the past two decades.

Question marks have been raised over the effects of MDMA on the nervous system and whether it damages cognitive functions among heavy users. There is a small number of carefully designed studies which indicate that in a clinical setting it probably won't cause any cognitive damage.

The drug is being provided by a Swiss pharmaceutical company. Participants are undergoing tests before and after MDMA-assisted therapy to see which areas of the brain are affected by PTSD and whether the therapy improves brain function.

The next step, once the US and Swiss trials are completed, will be for a global study of up to 500 patients.

from swissinfo

IT skills shortage reaches alarming levels

Switzerland is witnessing a dramatic shortage of information technology professionals, with enrolment in IT courses well below replacement levels for the sector. The number of young people opting to study IT at a higher education level has dropped by more than half since 2001. In the coming years there will not be enough new IT professionals to fill the vacancies left by retiring staff.

In an effort to address the problem, various players in the Swiss IT sector have joined forces to declare 2008 the "Year of IT". The aim of the programme is to reverse the negative trend by getting young people interested in the industry again. Events planned for 2008 will also draw attention to the key role played by the sector in the economy and society. The fact that young people are rejecting IT as a career choice can partly be put down to an outdated image problem. The days of the computer expert isolated in a white room in front of his screen are long gone. Now the IT person must be more communicative and needs to have a good understanding of the industry he or she is working for. There is also great diversity within IT; you will never do the same job twice. The Year of IT will be targeting primary schools with a roadshow and other events.

Women are also a target for the organisers because of how under-represented they are in the sector. Female participation varies depending on the speciality but does not rise above 15 per cent.

Computer knowledge is required in three-quarters of all jobs in Switzerland, and the vast majority of households have a computer, yet the IT sector retains a certain mystique.

The IT sector in Switzerland makes a valuable contribution to the economy. In banking alone, an estimated SFr 7.5 billion is invested in IT per year.

Switzerland's good standing in global competitiveness is under threat if the ongoing decline in interest in IT is not tackled.

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