

FROM MAGIC MUSHROOMS TO MIEDS

Mental health The TGA's approval of the psychedelics MDMA and psilocybin as medicines has generated anxiety about a lack of regulation but also optimism that they might succeed where other treatments fail, writes **Tanveer Ahmed**.

P sychiatrists have long been known as the rebels of medicine. It's a field that attracts those who feel on the outer of medical orthodoxies, and there are few things more emblematic of the counterculture than psychedelics, which were approved as medicines earlier this month by the Therapeutic Goods Administration.

The mood among psychological experts is one of excitement, surprise and considerable anxiety.

"This could be a shitshow," says Prashanth Puspanathan, founder of a virtual platform for psychedelic-assisted treatment and clinical adviser to the Australian Psychedelic Society. "Behind the door is a regulatory vacuum."

(Puspanathan is also the founder of a cryptocurrency brokerage firm Caleb and Brown, a combination he sees as complementary.)

Paul Likhaitzky, sounding like former US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, says: "Most potential prescribers don't know what they don't know."

Likhaitzky is a neuroscientist who founded the country's first psychedelics research laboratory at Monash University in 2020. He says research and discussion of psychedelics

is barely a few years old in Australia, yet the TGA has opened an extraordinary door.

Both Puspanathan and Likhaitzky worry that the critical importance of counselling accompanying any psychedelic treatment has not been mandated by the TGA. This may place a handbrake on the role of psychologists and other professionals to participate in forms of collaborative care. There are also concerns about inadequate evidence and the numbers of trained professionals.

But the sense of cautious optimism is grounded in a belief that the decision will generate a flurry of activity that will steadily neutralise such concerns.

"We should not prematurely ossify treatment paradigms," says Likhaitzky, describing the international research from psychedelics treating a range of disorders from end-of-life anxiety to addiction and Alzheimer's disease as "compelling".

The clinical literature describes psychedelics producing a mystical type of experience that brings feelings of joy, peace and interconnectedness, via which patients are more able to confront the root causes of otherwise intractable mental maladies.

While there are several countries such as the United States, Canada, Switzerland and Israel, where psychedelics can be used outside of research trials, Australia will be the first country where the chemicals, specific-



Sydney psychiatrist Dr Ted Cassidy. PHOTO: DOMINIC LORRIMER

ally MDMA and psilocybin, are formally classified as medicines.

MDMA is the active ingredient found in ecstasy, and psilocybin is found in magic mushrooms. From July, they will be approved for use in treatment-resistant depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Ted Cassidy is a Sydney-based psychiatrist who set up treatment rooms in anticipation of the green light for psychedelic treatment. He is on the advisory panel of the lobby group Mind Medicine that was instrumental in the TGA approval.

"I think this is a real chance for psychiatry to take leadership. Clinical governance will be critical given there are genuine risks and so many unknowns," he says.

The Mind Medicine group, headed by investment banker Peter Hunt and opera singer Tania De Jong, has been maligned by some within the psychedelic community for their aggressive advocacy, which has been called premature and motivated by profit.

They were the subject of an ABC *Four Corners* investigation. "There is a lot of jealousy and envy in the sector," Hunt says. Even former Australian of the Year Professor Patrick McGorry, in a tweet sent after the TGA decision, asked if approval was too influenced by "intense private lobbying/special pleading by a zealous private group?"