

EDITORIAL

A psychedelic anniversary

'Most human beings live nowadays in big cities, in a dead world. They go to the moon, but don't even know how to look at a starry sky.' The Swiss scientist who made that remark in a television interview ahead of his 100th birthday last Wednesday certainly did his bit to promote star-gazing -- of a sort. Albert Hofmann discovered LSD, the hallucinogenic drug that once had people seeing not just stars but "Lucy in the sky with diamonds," as John Lennon put it in the song title that he always denied echoed the drug's initials. This birthday prompts a swirl of memories and reflections.

Dr. Hofmann once called lysergic acid diethylamide, the drug he stumbled upon in a Basel, Switzerland, laboratory in 1938, "medicine for the soul." And in fact LSD began its checkered history as a respectable medical product -- appropriately as the brainchild of a respectable, if obscure, chemist working for a respectable pharmaceutical company, Sandoz (now a part of Novartis).

Dr. Hofmann recognized LSD's mind-altering properties immediately -- he used himself as a guinea pig, to both good and bad effect -- but felt it had great, and legitimate, potential as both a psychotherapy aid and a painkiller. At age 100, and as the survivor of numerous acid "trips," he says he still does, even though LSD has been prohibited worldwide for several decades.

Perhaps one day the drug will shed its notoriety and become as standard a treatment as morphine, another medication with a lurid past. The symposium held in Basel last week to honor Dr. Hofmann's centennial certainly suggests that could happen. Titled "LSD: Problem Child and Wonder Drug," the forum was convened to promote serious discussion of the drug's therapeutic applications. Dr. Hofmann himself was there and used the occasion to call for an easing of the ban on LSD for medical purposes.

Before that comes to pass, of course, LSD has a lot to live down. It is not just a matter of its role as the poster drug of the psychedelic '60s, made infamous by Timothy Leary's silly advice to befuddled youths around the globe to "turn on, tune in and drop out."

More alarmingly, it was used in the 1950s in mind-control and truth serum experiments by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. And in Japan in the late '80s and early '90s, according to several investigations, the terrorist cult Aum Shinrikyo manufactured LSD under a chemical and biological weapons program that included the development of nerve agents such as the sarin gas used in the 1995 Tokyo subway attacks and biological agents such as botulism and anthrax. Cult leaders reportedly used LSD both to generate funds and to control followers.

All in all, LSD's history has been an unsavory one, as Dr. Hofmann admits. In an interview with the New York Times this month, the elderly but still astute scientist said that while LSD had been used "very successfully" for 10 years in psychoanalysis, the

drug was hijacked by the '60s counterculture and then demonized by the establishment for that reason. He conceded that LSD was a dangerous substance, but reserved his sharpest criticism for Leary and others whose misguided use and promotion of the drug had driven it underground, at the expense of many gravely ill people.

To our way of thinking, an even greater cause for concern than the prospect of revived '60s-style excesses is the misuse of LSD by people seeking to control others, be they government agencies or radical fringe groups. This is even more true today, in an era of heightened global terrorist activity, than it was in the period before 1967, when the United States led the worldwide proscription of LSD.

And yet, as Aum's documented use of the drug within the past 20 years shows, terrorists take no more notice of bans than they do of moral appeals. If they want to make LSD, or sarin, or anthrax, they can and they will. The same is true of agencies like the CIA that at times put themselves above the law, if not exactly outside it.

So, perhaps it *is* time to give the drug another chance, as Dr. Hofmann advocates. LSD is considered neither toxic nor addictive, and the many documented LSD-related disasters, including suicides and various lethal accidents, as often as not appear to result from impaired judgment rather than from direct physical effects of the drug.

It is the view of many medical scientists that a total ban on the drug deprives suffering people of a potential source of relief while doing nothing to curb underground or supra-legal use. It is hard to argue with that. Could there be a better occasion than the birthday of LSD's discoverer to launch a review of a ban based as much on political as on medical considerations? It would be a small step, but as they used to say in the '60s, far out.

The Japan Times: Jan. 15, 2006

(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)