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LSD: The Geek's Wonder Drug?

By [Ann Harrison](#) Also by this reporter

BASEL, Switzerland -- When Kevin Herbert has a particularly intractable programming problem, or finds himself pondering a big career decision, he deploys a powerful mind expanding tool -- LSD-25.

"It must be changing something about the internal communication in my brain. Whatever my inner process is that lets me solve problems, it works differently, or maybe different parts of my brain are used," said Herbert, 42, an early employee of Cisco Systems who says he solved his toughest technical problems while tripping to drum solos by the Grateful Dead -- who were among the many artists inspired by LSD.

"When I'm on LSD and hearing something that's pure rhythm, it takes me to another world and into another brain state where I've stopped thinking and started knowing," said Herbert who intervened to ban drug testing of technologists at Cisco Systems.

Herbert, who lives in Santa Cruz, California, joined 2,000 researchers, scientists, artists and historians gathered here over the weekend to celebrate the 100th birthday of Albert Hofmann, the Swiss chemist who discovered LSD here in 1938. The centenarian received a congratulatory birthday letter from the Swiss president, roses and a spontaneous kiss from a young woman in the crowd.

In many ways, the conference, LSD: Problem Child and Wonder Drug, an International Symposium on the Occasion of the 100th Birthday of Albert Hofmann, was a scientific coming-out party for the drug Hofmann fathered.

"LSD wanted to tell me something," Hofmann told the gathering Friday. "It gave me an inner joy, an open mindedness, a gratefulness, open eyes and an internal sensitivity for the miracles of creation."

Bent with age but still eloquent, Hofmann said he hoped the symposium would encourage the renewed therapeutic and spiritual use of LSD in supervised settings.

Lysergic acid diethylamide, a derivative of lysergic acid found in the alkaloids of the ergot grain fungus, has been illegal worldwide since the mid-1960s and still generates controversy. The conference was picketed Saturday by a splinter group from Scientology opposed to drug use.

The storied history of LSD as a mind-expanding tool began five years after Hofmann discovered LSD-25, and had what he described as a "peculiar presentiment" compelling him to resynthesize the drug. Without ingesting the

substance, Hofmann managed to accidentally absorb enough of the chemical to experience its effects. In a second intentional trip, Hoffman said he had a frightening experience that gave way to feelings of rebirth.

During the 1950s and 1960s, LSD was found to be a promising tool for psychiatry and psychotherapy and was studied by the CIA as a potential interrogation weapon. It was criminalized after it escaped from the lab to be widely embraced by the youth culture.

Hofmann said millions of people have taken LSD, but some had bad reactions when they took counterfeit drugs. He would like to see a modern Eleusis, the ancient Greek site that held the rituals of Eleusinian Mysteries which took place for two millennia beginning in 1500 BC. During the LSD symposium, mythologist Carl P. Ruck and chemist Peter Webster presented their research suggesting that an ergot preparation was the active ingredient for the Kykeon beverage used during the ritual.

"When Hofmann synthesized the chemical in LSD, he stumbled upon a 4,000-year-old secret," said Ruck, author of *Road to Eleusis*.

In 1958, Hofmann was the first to isolate the psychoactive substances of psilocybin and psilocin from Mexican magic mushrooms (*psilocybe mexicana*) which were among a variety of sacred plants used around the world to invite ecstatic and spiritual experiences.

The United States Supreme Court is now considering an appeal brought by the New Mexican chapter of the Uniao do Vegetal, or UDV, which uses the outlawed ayahuasca brew in its ceremonies and cites the Eleusinian Mysteries as a precedent for a psychoactive Eucharist.

At the symposium, presentations of electronic trance music and psychedelic art by painter Alex Grey encouraged meditative and spiritual reflection for participants -- especially those in altered states of consciousness.

Participants eager to describe their modern-day spiritual LSD experiences were encouraged to contribute to a [library](#) of drug experiences on the Erowid website. Earth and Fire Erowid, who operate the site, presented a sampling of comments at the symposium and documented the two to five known deaths that have been associated with LSD.

Geri Beil of Cologne, Germany, who attended the symposium, recalled his own ecstatic LSD experience on an Indian beach on New Year's day, 2000. "I was crying from happiness, so thankful to my parents that they created me," said Beil. "This experience has not disappeared; it has had a lasting effect."

Like Herbert, many scientists and engineers also report heightened states of creativity while using LSD. During a press conference on Friday, Hofmann revealed that he was told by Nobel-prize-winning chemist Kary Mullis that LSD had helped him develop the polymerase chain reaction that helps amplify specific DNA sequences.

"When you study natural science and the miracles of creation, if you don't turn into a mystic you are not a natural scientist," said Hofmann.

In his presentation, artist Alex Grey noted that Nobel-prize-winner Francis Crick, discoverer of the double helical structure of DNA, also told friends he received inspiration for his ideas from LSD, according to [news reports](#).

The gathering included a discussion of how early computer pioneers used LSD for inspiration. Douglas Englebart, the inventor of the mouse, Myron Stolaroff, a former Ampex engineer and LSD researcher who was attending the symposium, and Apple-cofounder Steve Jobs were among them. In the 2005 book *What the Dormouse Said*, *New York Times* reporter John Markoff quotes Jobs describing his LSD experience as "one of the two or three most important things he has done in his life."

But the symposium wasn't just a census of LSD-using notables. Attendees included psychotherapists and psychiatrists who discussed research into the therapeutic usefulness of psychedelic drugs.

Dr. Michael Mithoefer presented the preliminary findings of his study in Charleston, South Carolina, which is investigating whether MDMA is effective for treating post-traumatic stress disorder in people traumatized by crime or war.

Harvard University professor, Dr. John Halpern, discussed his proposed study -- now awaiting DEA approval -- using MDMA to treat anxiety in cancer patients.

The Florida-based Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) is supporting studies and research in Canada investigating the use of ibogain to treat drug addiction.

And a [study](#) at the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles, supported by the Heffter Research Institute, is investigating whether psilocybin effectively eases the anxiety of terminal cancer patients. Psychiatrist Charles Grob says his research group has located six of the needed 12 subjects and is looking for more participants.

While the data has yet to be analyzed, Grob told seminar participants that all the participants in the study have shown promising reactions, and he applauded the opportunity to share the data in an international gathering.

"It's very encouraging to see such a large number of people, including very knowledgeable people, getting together and sharing a common vision that these compounds have tremendous potential to facilitate healing, especially in areas that do not respond well to conventional treatments," said Grob. "There is global healing in these compounds which have been used for millennia by indigenous people that have much to teach modern man and modern woman."

MAPS founder Rick Doblin says his goal is to make psychedelic medicines into prescription drugs, lamenting that LSD is not yet being studied for therapeutic purposes. "We have been deeply touched by our experiences with psychedelics and it is hard that there is not a single legal study with LSD given to humans anywhere in the world," said Doblin. "We need to bring what is underground and illegal back into a legal context."

But Doblin notes that a group of people who say LSD provides relief from their cluster headaches have [organized](#) online and are pushing for a study at Harvard

to explore a possible therapy using the drug. If Harvard accepts the MDMA study, Doblin says it could pave the way for the symbolically important return of LSD research at Harvard that halted during the tenure of [Timothy Leary](#). His goal, says Doblin, is to secure an LSD study in time for Hofmann's 101st birthday.

Dr. Andrew Sewell, a psychiatrist and neurologist from the Harvard Medical School who studies alcohol and drug abuse, says most problems with LSD occur when users take an unknown dose they don't feel comfortable with, in an uncontrolled setting, without supervision to shield them from dangerous situations.

"LSD flashbacks are well-confirmed phenomenon but they are relatively rare and don't seem to cause as much trouble as the media would have you believe," said Dr. Sewell at the LSD symposium.

Dr. Sewell says people who have underlying mental disorders should not take LSD because it could make their symptoms worse. "Like any powerful drug, if LSD is used incorrectly it can cause more harm than good," said Dr. Sewell. "LSD is a potentially dangerous drug and should be taken under medical supervision."

"There is no evidence that LSD causes permanent brain damage -- and quite a lot of evidence that it doesn't," said Sewell. "We are lucky that we have over 1,000 papers written in the '50s and '60s when LSD was given to thousands and thousands of research subjects so we have a pretty good idea at this point what it does and does not do."

Asked if the world needs his invention, Hofmann said he hoped that the Basel LSD symposium would help create an appropriate place for LSD in society.

"I think that in human evolution it has never been as necessary to have this substance LSD," said Hofmann. "It is just a tool to turn us into what we are supposed to be."

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