

WITCHES, DRUGS AND RELIGION

Dr Terry Maguire, a proprietor pharmacist in Belfast and a research fellow in pharmacy practice at the School of Pharmacy, the Queen's University of Belfast, asks what part hallucinogens and mood-altering substances have played in social culture. From witches to Santa Claus, he suggests they may have had a greater impact than we imagine

One of my customers achieved considerable local fame telling of his experiences with a ghost. The tale concerned night-time visitations by a woman dressed in black. She physically abused him — threw him downstairs, beat him and made living impossible.

The clergy were summoned to exorcise the demon, and the housing executive was asked to provide other accommodation. Once he had been re-housed, there was no need for the priests and the apparitions ceased. Life returned to normal.

Cynically, I might have agreed with some who put it down to "the drink" or the need to provide an extreme reason to move house — had it not been for a chance glance at his medication records.

At the time the ghost was appearing, he was taking Ativan (lorazepam) to help him sleep. Possibly the "vision" was a reaction to (or withdrawal from) this benzodiazepine. His doctor stopped the medicine about the time the visions ceased.

Hallucinations among those taking short-acting benzodiazepines are well documented. Halcion (triazolam) was withdrawn in the UK and in Holland because of these side-effects¹.

By 1990, 42 cases of alleged sexual assault by dentists on patients who were sedated with intravenous benzodiazepines (diazepam or medazolam), had been reported². Such allegations, especially where there are no independent witnesses, are very serious for a doctor or dentist.

The allegations may be well-founded but they may equally have been benzodiazepine-induced fantasies.

Nigel Kennedy, the doyen of classical music, has been criticised for saying he had reached a stage in his career where, like Jimmy Hendrix and others, he would need "mood-altering substances" to get further inspiration. Accepting such a statement recognises that the distortion of perception by such drugs could improve creativity.

These three examples suggest that mood-altering substances are having as much of an effect on society today as they have had on societies of the past.

Hallucination

We understand the world around us by using five senses. If our senses are disrupted or distorted then what we see, smell, feel, hear and taste as real may, in fact, be unreal.

It has been suggested that schizophrenic patients are not mentally sub-normal. Rather, due to a biochemical disturbance in the brain, they perceive a distorted image of the world around them. It is their behaviour, resulting from an attempt to rationalise the "nonsense" being received by the brain, that makes them appear abnormal to the rest of us.

For schizophrenics the problem is an endogenous disease. However, such conditions may be induced by ingestion of substances which affect the transmission of information in the brain.

Medieval witches

In medieval Europe, witches were ruthlessly hunted and killed. One explanation for the existence of witches is that they were social outcasts, possibly lesbians. At that stage of history, lesbianism would not have been understood and not tolerated by a male-dominated society.

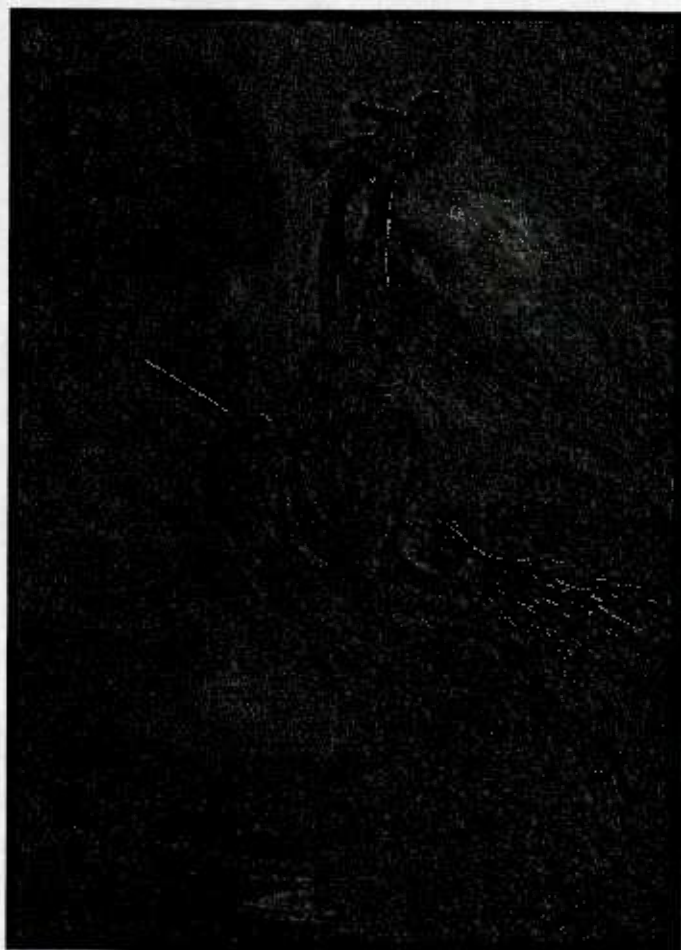
Witches were knowledgeable about the hallucinogenic

absorbed across the thin walls of the vagina to produce the required effect. This interesting drug delivery system offers an explanation of the origins of the "witch's broom", as a report into witchcraft from the 14th century suggests:

"In rifling the closet of the ladie, they found a pipe of oynment, wherewith she greased a staffe. On certain days and nights they anoint a staff and ride on it to the anointed place."³

Salem witches

The Salem witchcraft affair of 1692 was the worst outbreak of witch persecution in American



properties of herbs, in particular henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*), deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*) and mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*). These women may also have known of the hallucinogenic properties of chemicals found in the skins of toads and frogs (bufoen).

They would have been skilled in preparing potent elixirs and ointments from these plants for use in their rituals. Ointments applied to a brush shaft or broom and used as a "sex-toy" in ritual orgies would have ensured that the drugs were

history, and the story has been investigated extensively. One theory offered to explain the hysteria has implicated rye infected with ergot (*Claviceps purpurea*).

The victims — the witches — were identified by children, particularly girls around the age of puberty. It is known that girls at this age seem to be more susceptible to the hallucinogenic effects of ergot⁴.

While parents, younger children and boys were able to tolerate eating rye bread slightly infected with ergot, the girls experienced graphic

hallucinations. Considering their upbringing, in a society obsessed with strict religious practice and the power of the devil, their only rational explanation for their hallucinogenic experience was that they were "bewitched".

Religious visionaries

It is dangerous to try to explain religious visions in terms of hallucinogenic experiences as firmly held beliefs can easily be offended. This is certainly not my intention.

Some religions — like the Native American Church — even today use hallucinogenic drugs derived from plants as part of their religious worship. They argue that, rather than being the experience, the drug creates the link with God which fulfils their worship.

Soma, the god-narcotic of ancient India, is now thought to have been an elixir prepared mainly from the red mushroom, Fly Agaric (*Amanita muscaria*)⁵.

Fly Agaric was used recreationally by many social groups. It was collected in the Autumn and dried for use later. The mushroom is particularly poisonous due to its alkaloid content but this has never deterred its use. Today, in Europe, its use has been largely replaced by alcohol.

It has been suggested that Fly Agaric was associated with the culture of Santa Claus and that its scarlet mound, speckled with white, explains why Santa Claus wears red and white and flies through the sky.

St Catherine, who lived in the 1500s, received visitations from various saintly beings. During these meetings she was encouraged to have sexual relationships. St Catherine's standing in the church ensured that her description of these events was viewed as a "blessing" rather than a hedonistic orgy.

But one explanation counters saintly goings-on for a more

worldly experience. St Catherine was overweight and, to ensure that she would not eat excessively, she sprinkled her food with grated Fly Agaric. In theory this imparted a bitter taste making the food quite unpalatable. However, she certainly ate enough to produce hallucinations.

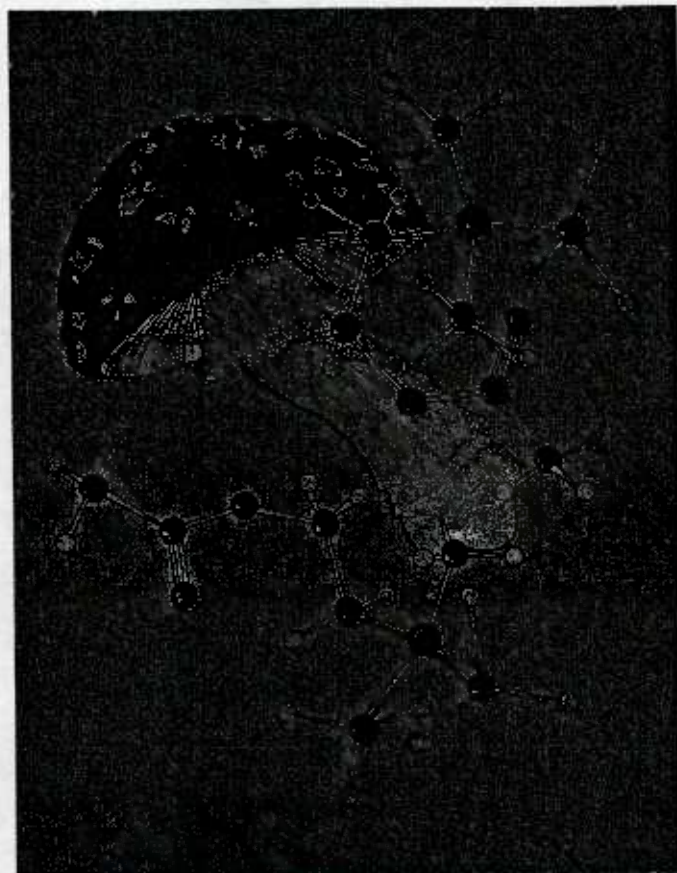
Virgin visionaries

Visions of the Virgin Mary, particularly within the European Catholic culture, have been reported frequently since the mid-19th century. They have had a profound effect on many Roman Catholics, and

remain today a focus of worship for millions who flock annually to the many sites of pilgrimage — Fatima in Portugal, Knock in Ireland and the most famous, Lourdes.

Common characteristics appear to link the visionaries: they were all young adults, mainly girls around the age of puberty.

The story of Bernadette Soubirous, St Bernadette of Lourdes, has a pattern similar with other virgin visionaries. Essentially, poor and oppressed Roman Catholics have been much more successful in seeing the Virgin than rich ones.



Fly Agaric — a possible source of soma, the god-narcotic of ancient India

I have been intrigued by Bernadette's story which, in my opinion, has some features which indicate that, at the time of the visions in 1858, she may have been subjected to the effects of ergotism.

She had been ill, was weak and was at the age of puberty. Why didn't other young females in the village suffer similar effects? Bernadette's father was a miller, frequently in financial difficulties. If he had received ergot-infected grain for milling he may have been legally required to dispose of it. Possibly, to ward off starvation, he used it for his family bread.

One writer, experimenting with a mescaline to induce hallucination, found that she saw saintly figures⁶.

Conclusion

Hallucinogens have had a part to play in the development of many cultures. Their effects on the mind can be profound; laymen, in attempting to explain what has occurred, create colourful stories of witches, religious and sexual fantasies. Certainly the telling is much more interesting than any scientific explanation I can provide.

References

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