

Protestors of psilocybin ban arrested at DEA headquarters

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The advocacy group Right to Try Psilocybin staged a protest in front of DEA headquarters in Washington, DC, yesterday, challenging the criminalization of psilocybin, the psychoactive compound in psychedelic mushrooms. The group advocates for the right to use psilocybin to ease end-of-life anxiety and distress for terminally ill patients.

Numerous studies on psilocybin have shown enormous potential in the substance's health benefits, primarily to help ease end-of-life anxiety and severe depression. Many local governments have decriminalized psilocybin and other psychedelic substances — also known as entheogens — in the past few years, despite their Schedule I status, which makes them illegal at the federal level.

Seventeen protesters were arrested at the “die-in” — like a sit-in, except protesters pretended to be dead — including David Bronner, CEO (Cosmic Engagement Officer) of Dr. Bronner's, the soap company. Bronner is an advocate for psychedelic-assisted therapies and Dr. Bronner's has donated millions to drug advocacy and research organizations.

A fairly peaceful event, the demonstration mainly involved several individuals laying down in front of the entrance to the DEA building, blocking its entrance. Some smoke bombs were set off and words were painted on the DEA building, including “Right to try.” The 17 protesters were arrested after a few hours of laying down in front of the building.

Is psilocybin legal or not?

Yesterday's protest challenged the DEA's response to an inquiry on how to obtain psilocybin for medical patients.

The federal Right To Try Act was signed into law in May 2018, allowing patients diagnosed with a life-threatening illness access to investigational drugs. In Jan. 2021, Dr. Sunil Aggarwal, a Seattle palliative care physician and co-director of the Advanced Integrative Medical Science Institute (AIMS), and Kathryn Tucker, special counsel with the Emerge Law Group, wrote to DEA officials, asking how to obtain psilocybin for terminal patients. DEA officials responded by stating that psilocybin is an illegal Schedule I substance, and not exempt through the Right To Try Act.

In March 2021, Aggarwal and two terminally ill cancer patients sued the DEA, but the case was dismissed earlier this year. In February of this year, AIMS filed a petition with the DEA, asking to reschedule psilocybin, which would loosen its restrictions so patients can access it. The DEA has yet to respond to that request.

Yesterday's die-in protested the DEA's stance on keeping psilocybin illegal for terminally ill patients, despite the Right To Try Act.

"Access is intended by duly enacted state and federal Right to Try (RTT) laws. Yet the DEA has engaged in delay and obstruction. This is unacceptable. My clients are running out of time," said Tucker. "There is urgent need for the DEA to accommodate RTT and enable access. This demonstration shines the bright light of public concern and outrage on this agency's conduct."

The therapeutic potential of psilocybin

On the heels of the 2018 Right To Try Act, in 2019, the FDA classified psilocybin as a breakthrough therapy, based on clinical trials for treatment-resistant depression and major depressive disorder, suggesting that preliminary research on the substance had enormous potential over existing therapies.

A 2016 study from Johns Hopkins showed that psilocybin greatly reduced anxiety and depression in cancer patients, also improving attitudes about life, mood, relationships, and spirituality. Another study from 2020 showed the substance's potential to treat major depressive disorder.

Cultures all over the globe have been consuming psychedelic mushrooms for thousands of years, including prehistoric and ancient cultures of Mesoamerica, Australia, Scandinavia, and Greece, among many others.

Commonly known to send consumers on a psychedelic trip including hallucinations, sensory distortions, non-linear thinking, and mystical experiences, psilocybin is known for its potential to elicit profound insight and feelings of unity or interconnectedness with the surrounding world, typically bringing about positive feelings of peace and joy.

It is perhaps these effects which are thought to have enormous health benefits for patients, potentially bringing about feelings of acceptance, and clearing or “unsticking” one’s mind of negative thought patterns.

Many local governments have decriminalized psilocybin and other psychedelic substances. Most notably, the state of Oregon legalized psilocybin for therapeutic use in Nov. 2020. The law allows for the administration of the substance to mental health patients while under the supervision of a licensed facilitator. The state plans to have psilocybin clinics up and running by early 2023.

Many cities have also decriminalized entheogens, including Denver, CO; Oakland and Santa Cruz, CA; Seattle, WA; Ann Arbor and Detroit, MI; Cambridge, Somerville, and Northampton, MA; and Washington, DC. The number of cities and states decriminalizing entheogens attests to the growing acceptance of the substances and their perceived benefits for mental health.

