

British Columbia

Footage of therapists spooning and pinning down patient in B.C. trial for MDMA therapy prompts review

Video of Dr. Donna Dryer and Richard Yensen 'substantially deviated' from accepted research protocol

[Bethany Lindsay](#) · CBC News · Posted: Mar 29, 2022 4:00 AM PT | Last Updated: April 9



A still taken from video released by New York Magazine's Cover Story: Power Trip podcast shows PTSD patient Meaghan Buisson, centre, during a clinical trial for MDMA-assisted psychotherapy in 2015. She is being physically restrained by married therapists Richard Yensen and Dr. Donna Dryer. (Courtesy of New York Magazine's Cover Story: Power Trip)

WARNING: This article contains graphic content and may affect those who have experienced sexual violence or know someone affected by it.

Newly released videos that show two B.C. therapists cuddling, spooning, blindfolding and pinning down a distressed PTSD patient during clinical trials using MDMA have prompted a review of their work and fresh concerns about public safety.

The 2015 footage shows psychiatrist Dr. Donna Dryer and unlicensed therapist Richard Yensen, a married couple who were then sub-investigators for the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), during their second experimental session in a Health Canada-approved Phase II clinical trial with patient Meaghan Buisson in Vancouver.

The videos [were released last week through New York magazine's podcast *Cover Story: Power Trip*](#), which explores the growing field of psychedelic therapy.

Buisson, a hiking guide based on Vancouver Island, told CBC she hasn't been able to watch the videos because even hearing her former therapists' voices triggers her post-traumatic stress disorder.

But she has seen screen shots of the footage and has had the content described to her, including intimate physical contact and a scene where Yensen is lying on top of her and holding her down as she moans in obvious anguish.

- [As psychedelic therapy goes mainstream, former patient warns of danger of sexual abuse](#)

She believes the public needs to know what happened in these sessions.

"This is horrific. This happened in a Health Canada-approved clinical safety trial," she said. "For that to happen in this environment, under far more scrutiny than the substance will ever again be under, is extremely troubling."

The footage is being made public at a time when psychedelic drugs are becoming increasingly mainstream, and substances like MDMA — a laboratory-made party drug often called ecstasy or molly — are being hailed as miracle drugs for serious psychiatric conditions.

Buisson believes the videos should serve as a warning that if these drugs are legalized for use in psychotherapy, there needs to be a strong system in place to keep patients safe while they're under the influence of powerful mind-altering substances.

"I just want people to realize, this is not against MDMA. This is not against psychedelics," she said.

"I'm just saying that if this drug is going to be legalized and medicalized in this way, then there is a certain degree of safety and fiduciary responsibility and credibility that goes into being part of the medical system — and especially with vulnerable subjects."

Therapists 'substantially deviated' from protocol

The footage comes from multiple video cameras placed in the treatment room by MAPS to ensure patients were safe and therapists were following the treatment protocol.

But MAPS spokesperson Betty Aldworth acknowledged last week that the organization's staff did not actually view the videos until November 2021, six years after they were filmed.

Aldworth said MAPS is now conducting a compliance review for the Vancouver trial site, reviewing all videos and documentation related to each participant.

"Though the compliance review is ongoing, MAPS has provisionally determined that Yensen and Dryer substantially deviated from the [MDMA-assisted Therapy Treatment Manual](#) on several occasions during the treatment period," Aldworth wrote.

WATCH | Videos show Buisson's MDMA session with Yensen and Dryer:





Footage shows intimate physical contact during MDMA-assisted psychotherapy trial

3 months ago | 2:36

Newly released video from New York magazine's podcast "Cover Story: Power Trip" shows B.C. therapists Richard Yensen and Dr. Donna Dryer cuddling, spooning, blindfolding and pinning down a distressed PTSD patient during clinical trials using MDMA.

Health Canada has yet to respond to requests for comment. Yensen and Dryer have not responded to emails or phone calls requesting comment.

Yensen has admitted to having sex with Buisson after the experimental sessions ended but while she was still enrolled in the clinical trial. In a 2018 lawsuit that has since been settled out of court, [she alleged it was sexual assault](#), while Yensen claimed in his response that Buisson manipulated him and initiated the encounter.

After Buisson first went public in 2019 with allegations of sexual assault, MAPS issued a statement acknowledging that Yensen had [an "inappropriate and unethical" sexual relationship](#) with a study participant and saying it was cutting ties with the couple.

The statement also said MAPS had previously been unaware of any "inappropriate interaction" between its therapists and study participants, and "monitoring of study records throughout the course of the trial and afterwards did not indicate signs of ethical violation."

'That is not therapy'

MDMA is a recreational drug that produces feelings of euphoria and enhances sensation and suggestibility. It's one of several illicit substances, including ketamine, LSD and psilocybin mushrooms, that are currently being studied for potential uses in psychotherapy.

The videos of Buisson's sessions were filmed during Phase II clinical trials, when drugs are assessed to determine if they are safe and have an effect on humans.

- [Vancouver psychedelics company gets Health Canada greenlight for MDMA therapy study](#)

CBC has not viewed the full video of the session, which lasted for at least five hours. But *Cover Story: Power Trip* co-host Lily Kay Ross and David Nickles have reviewed the full tape, as well as the videos from Buisson's first MDMA session. Nickles has also viewed the footage of Buisson's third experimental session.

Both described the tapes as difficult to watch.

"The number of checks and balances that failed beyond the therapist's own decision-making is just unreal," said Nickles, managing editor of the psychedelic watchdog publication *Psymposia*.



Hiking guide Meaghan Buisson embraces her dog Zoey during a trip to Vancouver this month. (Bethany Lindsay/CBC)

Buisson signed up for the experimental therapy in a last-ditch effort to treat post-traumatic stress disorder related to a history of sexual abuse and assault.

She was particularly disturbed to learn about two clips in which she is blindfolded. The clips culminate with Buisson struggling and wailing as Yensen uses his entire body to pin her to the bed and Dryer holds a towel in her mouth.

"As a woman who is sexual assault survivor, I'm really uncomfortable being touched around my head.... I was very clear. I didn't want blindfolds on," Buisson said.

"To learn that I was blindfolded, pinned down, gagged — there are no words for that. That is not therapy."

That footage is equally troubling for Ross, who completed her PhD in sexual violence research.

"It raises the question of, how do people persist past such clear cries of distress, to continue inflicting the things that are causing that level of distress to a person who is in therapy to treat sexual violence-related trauma?" Ross said.

Spooning and cuddling

Viewed in sequence, the clips show escalating physical contact between the therapists and their patient.

In the earliest segment, Buisson tells the couple she needs to relax, and Yensen asks her, "Do you want to try and maybe lie down and spread your legs?"

Buisson immediately snaps her body tight in response to that, folding forward into her knees while she rocks back and forth on the bed. Yensen places his hand on her back, and after a few seconds, she uses her elbow to knock it away.





Psychiatrist Dr. Donna Dryer and psychotherapist Richard Yensen are a married couple who live on Cortes Island in B.C. (HeartoftheShaman.ca)

In segments filmed later in the session, Yensen and Dryer are shown lying in bed with Buisson, with their arms around her — both separately and together. In one scene, Yensen is shown spooning her from behind and twice readjusting his hips to press his groin against her.

"It's important to understand that the MAPS manual actually does not allow for this kind of touch," Ross noted.

The [MAPS manual for MDMA-assisted therapy](#) refers to two types of touch that it deems appropriate during sessions.

One is "nurturing touch," which could include holding a patient's hand or patting them on the back when they're agitated. The other is "focused bodywork," which the manual defines as offering resistance for the patient to push against.

RCMP recommended criminal charges

Buisson has submitted the videos of her sessions to the College of Physicians and Surgeons of B.C., where she has had an active complaint against Dryer for more than four years. A college spokesperson said she could not comment on that investigation.

Yensen is not a licensed psychologist in B.C., and because the province does not regulate therapists and counsellors, there is no official body that can investigate his actions or discipline him if deemed necessary.

- [Growing interest in psychedelic treatments for mental illness, but expert warns more robust research needed](#)

The videos have also been reviewed by the Quadra Island detachment of the RCMP, where Buisson filed a sex assault complaint in 2019.

Police recommended criminal charges, but Crown prosecutors declined to approve them, RCMP Cpl. Chris Voller confirmed. In B.C., the charge approval standard requires a "[substantial likelihood of conviction](#)."

Dryer is a clinical assistant professor in the psychiatry department at the University of B.C. UBC's director of university affairs, Matthew Ramsey, said in an email that the conduct shown in the video is outside the school's jurisdiction, and he couldn't comment because the study was not conducted or approved by the university.

Buisson received a similar response in 2019 when she requested that UBC investigate Dryer's role in her treatment, according to emails shared with CBC.

- ['A very pernicious system': After decades of inaction, could psychotherapy finally be regulated in B.C.?](#)

After all of this, Buisson says she feels like she's been let down by every system that was put in place to protect patients from harm, and that's why she's speaking out.

She says she worries about what could happen to future patients if rigorous checks and balances aren't in place before substances like MDMA are legalized for therapeutic use.

"There's nothing I've seen in the last four years that gives me any reason to believe that what happened to me won't happen again," she said.

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