Will Oregon legalize 'magic mushroom' therapy?

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Measure 109 would make Oregon the first state in the nation allowed to manufacture, deliver and administer psilocybin products and psilocybin-assisted therapy at supervised and licensed facilities.

The measure, if voters in November pass it, also would impose a two-year development period for the Oregon Health Authority to establish parameters for the new therapy.

Some of Oregon's medical and psychiatric leaders, including the Oregon Psychiatric Physicians Association, argue the measure isn't what it seems, and the effects of the therapy have not been adequately studied.

Supporters of the measure say the magic-mushroom-derived products, paired with structured therapy sessions, are safe and have unparalleled benefits, especially for people who have not found relief from traditional talk therapy, medications or other methods.

Campaign organizers point to studies from research institutions such as Johns Hopkins, UCLA and NYU, saying psilocybin is uniquely effective in treating depression, anxiety, addiction and end-of-life psychological distress.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has granted psilocybin therapy a "breakthrough therapy" designation.

Psilocybin mushrooms -- "magic mushrooms" --displayed by a grower in Denver. Once grown, the psychedelic mushrooms are dried and then either eaten raw or steeped into tea. Denver voters in May decriminalized the personal possession of the fungi, although police retain the right to arrest people for selling or distributing them in large quantities. TREVOR HUGHES-USA TODAY NETWORK

Basics of Measure 109

Psilocybin therapy uses a medicine derivative found in mushrooms to treat depression, anxiety, addiction and other mental health challenges, campaign leaders explained.

Under the proposal, patients would not need a prescription or formal diagnosis to participate in the therapy.

An estimated one in every five adults is coping with a mental health condition, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, with Oregon's rates among the worst for depression and suicide.

Proponents say the treatment could help thousands of Oregonians.

The measure stipulates a two-year program development period, during which the Oregon Health Authority would learn more about the therapy and adopt rules for implementation, allowing people age 21 and older to access it.

The measure requires the health authority to establish an advisory board for future accountability and prohibits the sale of psilocybin products from Oregon to other states.

Tom Eckert and his wife, Sheri, are the co-sponsors of the Psilocybin Service Initiative. They are in private practice together where they counsel couples and men who've been required to attend a domestic violence program. KRISTIAN FODEN-VENCIL/OPB

How psilocybin affects the brain, body

The exact mechanism of these drugs is not completely understood, explained Nick Gideonse, a hospice physician with Oregon Health & Science University who publicly supports Measure 109.

However, he said they've been studied enough for physicians to know it changes neurotransmitters, including serotonin, known for affecting mood. As a result, different neural networks are opened, like new roads appearing on a map.

Gideonse said this can lead to people perceiving things in a new way, including a mix of senses known as "synesthesia." "The flower smells pink," Gideonse gave as an example.

Temporary connections are made that would not normally exist, he said. He clarified psilocybin is not a hallucinogenic, giving an example of when a patient sees things that aren't there.

Gideonse said physicians believe the experience of seeing things in a new light stays with those who undergo the therapy, making just one session highly effective. He said it gets them unstuck from unhelpful mental loops.

Therapy in three parts

Since psilocybin therapy is currently illegal in the United States, those who have experienced it have mostly traveled outside the country to undergo the therapy.

Tom and Sheri Eckert, therapists and chief petitioners of Measure 109, developed a framework that focuses on a sequence of sessions.

Patients first have a preparation session in which they talk with the service facilitator, sometimes referred to as a coach or therapist. They discuss questions the patient may have, develop a physical setting that will make them comfortable and set a personal intention for the therapy.

In the next session, the psilocybin is administered. It can be made into a powder and given as a capsule or dried and eaten or steeped in tea.

Though it differs for each individual, Tom Eckert said most experiences last four to six hours. Many are able to get what they need out of the session in one to three sessions, he said.

The physical and emotional reactions to the drug differ from person to person.

Some have said they felt calm. Others reported panic attacks or purging of emotions, Gideonse explained, resulting from them processing whatever they're working through.

The facilitator monitors them throughout and talks with the client at the end to make sure they are able to drive home safely.

The patient returns in the following days for what's called the integration session. During this time, the two reflect on the experience and the new realizations the client had.

Testimony: Learning to live while dying

Portland resident Mara McGraw had tried "all the standard things."

Some had no effect. Some gave her allergic reactions. And traditional talk therapy helped, but not with the enormity of what she was going through.

Just before her birthday in 2017, McGraw, now 51, was diagnosed with neuroendocrine cancer, a rare, terminal cancer with a life expectancy of 18-24 months.

Her first major surgery removed a four-pound tumor from her liver.

In the coming months and years, she'd have 12 lymph nodes and one-third of her right lung removed. As soon as she recovered, she'd have to have another surgery. The cancer kept coming back, aggressively.

"My body was tense all the time," she said.

This was in addition to the existential crisis she said she was going through, having to confront her beliefs about life and death and learn to let go of her body without fear.

She's aware she has a progressive illness. But McGraw said she's better able to handle that due to her experience with psilocybin therapy earlier this year.

McGraw and her facilitator talked during her pre-session about "mindset and setting," two things considered to be very important to get the most out of the therapy.

She wanted to be in an outdoor space at the facility because she loves nature. She sat in a reclining chair, cozily wrapped in her blankets. Her intent was to "figure out how to keep living when I'm dying."

She stressed that everyone experiences things differently, but she described it as a very calm and gentle experience, saying her body "remembered how to relax again."

She said she was self-aware and able to control all of her faculties, getting up to go to the restroom or get a drink of water, for example.

McGraw has only had the drug administered to her once. Her experience lasted for about six hours.

She said it made her mentally feel less stuck, less cluttered.

"My experience with psilocybin therapy was that it just opened up my brain and helped me to find my own way with my own insights," she said, adding that it was powerful to come to a new awareness on her own of how to approach things.

Those feelings have stayed with her in the weeks since. McGraw said it has also helped her have difficult conversations with her adult son about end-of-life care.

While those conversations would have brought her a lot of sadness and fear in the past, she said her experience allowed her, and subsequently her son, to approach them with curiosity rather than dread.

Opposition: Not ready, 'simply false'

Measure 109 is supported by several healthcare professionals, treatment providers, veterans' groups and others across Oregon. The committee Yes on Psilocybin Therapy has raised nearly $1.6 million in campaign contributions to date.

However, not everyone believes it's should be made available in this way yet.

"This measure is not what it appears," said Nicole Cirino, president of the Oregon Psychiatric Physicians Association. "It is not, in our opinion, a medical measure per se."

Cirino said there is language in the measure voters should be aware and wary of, such as not needing a diagnosis or prescription.

As the measure is written, the therapy does not have to be administered by someone with a medical or mental health license. And it specifies that the service centers are not a health care facility subject to the state statutes that regulate those.

"Those are written in the measure," Cirino said. "OHA couldn't change the measure; they could go through the legislative process, but that's a lot of unknowns.

"Really, it ties the hands of the Oregon Health Authority to be able to make this a safe, medical treatment for individuals with mental health illnesses."

Cirino said psilocybin therapy is being studied for a few psychiatric conditions, but it's in the early stages of trials and hasn't gone on to the third phase of FDA trials, which are the largest.

At this point, she said, they don't have enough information about what conditions it will treat and what adverse effects there are.

"We think the measure is also presenting with false claims that magic mushroom treats ... anxiety, depression, addiction and end-of-life psychological distress," she said. "We do not know yet if psilocybin treats this wide variety of mental health conditions."

Cirino said the data is promising, but it is too early to tell.

"The people who are actually treating mental health in Oregon ... are not the ones supporting this measure," she said. "Wait for the science. Trust the experts."

Testimony: Processing military combat

Chad Kuske, 39, said he was simply going through the motions after the end of his military career. Having served 18.5 years with the Navy SEALs, he was medically retired for a "slew of reasons, all under the umbrella of PTSD."

He described his career as a lot of combat, exceedingly high paced, high stress, competitive and with no room for error.

"We thrived on it, but after a long period of time, that takes a massive toll on the mind, body, spirit. Everything," Kuske said. "When you're removed from that, it's easy to find yourself feeling a lack of purpose."

He said he was angry all the time, depressed and unable to connect with anyone.

"I really felt desperate to feel something again," he said.

He tried traditional therapy, prescription medications and lifestyle changes. Nothing helped. But something resonated with him when he learned about psilocybin therapy.

Kuske said he'd been down the road of drugs and alcohol before and didn't want to self-medicate. So, he said, he waited for the right opportunity. Two and a half years after retiring, he connected with a group of veterans that helped him find a place outside the U.S. to have it administered.

"It absolutely works, like nothing else," Kuske said.

Kuske said he's done the therapy a handful of times, with each experience offering something different and providing a wide variety of sensations. He described his first experience as ceremonial.

He stressed the importance of going to a safe, credible facilitator, and doing all the sessions to fully process the experience.

"Every time ... I've gotten exactly what I needed. Maybe not what I wanted," he said, laughing. "From the first time I tried it, it was obvious that these medicines have the ineffable way of healing the body in exactly the way it needs."

Read the full measure at http://oregonvotes.org/irr/2020/034text.pdf.

For more information on the Yes for Measure 109 campaign, go to https://voteyeson109.org/. For more information on the Oregon Psychiatric Physician Association and its stance, go to www.oregonpsychiatric.org.

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