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Psychedelic drugs: more emphasis on safety issues

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Psychedelic drugs have safety issues that are linked with effects such as hallucinations, paranoia and mood changes. In our view, your editorially independent articles on these drugs — sponsored by the biotechnology firm Atai Life Sciences — should have given more attention to such concerns to avoid serving an industry-friendly narrative that could do more harm than good (see www.nature.com/collections/edcbibiadj).

For example, the article on psilocybin for pain relief (*Nature* 609, S100–S102; 2022) notes that researchers are trying to avoid the mistakes that contributed to the opioid crisis. But there are strong parallels: prescription of psychedelics and of opioids is rising as a result of aggressive marketing, whereas the evidence for effectiveness comes mostly from small, short-term trials involving highly selected patients in secure settings, without adequate comparators. And attention to safety issues such as tolerance and drug dependence is crucial, particularly over the long term.

The US Food and Drug Administration has designated many psychedelics as a ‘breakthrough therapy’, in effect lowering the bar for approval. Esketamine, for example, was controversially approved for treatment-resistant depression without adequate monitoring to assess its long-term harm-to-benefit ratio (E. H. Turner *Lancet Psychiatry* 6, 977–979; 2019).

Competing Interests

F.N., L.C., E.T., A.B. and I.A.C. are among those on the LowN List of industry independent experts. E.T. is a former FDA reviewer.