

Rediscovering MDMA (ecstasy): the role of the American chemist Alexander T. Shulgin

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Abstract

Aims: Alexander T. Shulgin is widely thought of as the father of +/-3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA). This paper re-assesses his role in the modern history of this drug. **Methods:** We analysed systematically Shulgins original publications on MDMA, his publications on the history of MDMA and his laboratory notebook. **Results:** According to Shulgins book PIHKAL (1991), he synthesized MDMA in 1965, but did not try it. In the 1960s Shulgin also synthesized MDMA-related compounds such as 3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDA), 3-methoxy-4,5-methylenedioxyamphetamine (MMDA) and 3,4-methylenedioxyethylamphetamine (MDE), but this had no impact on his rediscovery of MDMA. In the mid-1970s Shulgin learned of a special effect caused by MDMA, whereupon he re-synthesized it and tried it himself in September 1976, as confirmed by his laboratory notebook. In 1977 he gave MDMA to Leo Zeff PhD, who used it as an adjunct to psychotherapy and introduced it to other psychotherapists. **Conclusion:** Shulgin was not the first to synthesize MDMA, but he played an important role in its history. It seems plausible that he was so impressed by its effects that he introduced it to psychotherapist Zeff in 1977. This, and the fact that in 1978 he published with David Nichols the first paper on the pharmacological action of MDMA in humans, explains why Shulgin is sometimes (erroneously) called the father of MDMA.

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