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Dr Humphry Osmond

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Dr Humphry Osmond, the psychiatrist who has died aged 86, coined the term "psychedelic" to describe the mind-altering substances LSD and mescaline, and introduced Aldous Huxley to these drugs; in 1953 he administered 400 mg of mescaline to Huxley, an episode described in the novelist's cult book *The Doors of Perception* (1954).

Osmond had become interested in d-lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) after reading the Swiss chemist Albert Hoffman's description of the psychological and behavioural effects of the drug. Having noticed that LSD seemed to mimic the symptoms of early schizophrenia, Osmond had been investigating its use in the treatment of mental illness and alcoholism.

In 1952 he shocked the medical world by drawing attention to the structural similarity between mescaline and adrenaline molecules, implying that schizophrenia might be a form of self-intoxication caused by the body mistakenly producing its own hallucinogenic compounds. He suggested, moreover, that mescaline enabled a normal person to see the world through the eyes of a schizophrenic and should be used as a training tool for members of the medical profession.

When Huxley - whose novel *Brave New World* (1931) described a totalitarian society in which the population is controlled by drugs - read Osmond's report, he decided to offer himself as a guinea pig. At first Osmond was apprehensive; he did not, he later wrote, "relish the possibility, however remote, of finding a small but discreditable niche in literary history as the man who drove Aldous Huxley mad". He was relieved, therefore, when, as the drug took effect, Huxley exclaimed: "How absolutely incredible!"

It took Huxley 70 pages to relate, in *The Doors of Perception*, what happened on that first "trip". An hour and a half into the experience he described staring at a bunch of flowers: "I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation - the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence." In fact, far from undergoing "imitation psychosis", Huxley had a mystical experience, and predicted that a religious revival would come about "as the result of biochemical discoveries that will make it possible for large numbers of men and women to achieve a radical self-transcendence and a deeper understanding of the nature of things".

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Osmond and Huxley remained close friends after their experiment and corresponded for many years. During their search for a name to describe the hallucinogenic drugs, Huxley proposed the word "phanerothyme",

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derived from roots relating to "spirit" or "soul". He wrote to Osmond, "To make this trivial world sublime/Take half a gramme of phanerothyme." Osmond replied: "To fathom hell or soar angelic/Just take a pinch of psychedelic."

Psychedelic, from the Greek for mind ("psyche") and the verb "delein" (to manifest), means "mind-manifesting". In 1957 Osmond addressed a meeting of the New York Academy of Sciences using the term. Hallucinogenic drugs, he argued, did much more than mimic psychosis, and thus needed a name that included the "concepts of enriching the mind and enlarging the vision".

During the 1950s and 1960s, psychedelics were used, with some success, in the treatment of a variety of psychiatric disorders. But after their use (and abuse) by the hippy generation, they were officially prohibited in 1966, and by 1970 had been classified as illegal.

For Osmond - who, far from being a hippy, was a respectable research scientist - the need to protect society had the effect of limiting progress. "I believe," he wrote, "that psychedelics provide a chance, perhaps only a slender one, for homo faber, the cunning, ruthless, foolhardy, pleasure-greedy toolmaker, to merge into that other creature whose presence we have so rashly presumed, homo sapiens, the wise, the understanding, the compassionate, in whose fourfold vision art, politics, science and religion are one."

"My experiences with these substances," he added, "have been the most strange, most awesome, and among the most beautiful things in a varied and fortunate life."

Humphry Osmond was born on July 1 1917 in Surrey and educated at Haileybury. After leaving school he intended to become a banker, but ended up working for an architect, an experience that was to have a lasting effect. After attending Guy's Hospital Medical School, Osmond served as a surgeon-lieutenant in the Navy, where he trained to become a ship's psychiatrist.

Following demobilisation, Osmond did a formal residency in psychiatry at St George's Hospital, Tooting, where he met and married a nurse, Jane Roffey. He began to take an interest in hallucinogenic drugs and their use in the treatment of psychiatric illness. In 1951, after his ideas met with little enthusiasm in the Freudian-dominated British mental health establishments, Osmond and his wife emigrated to Saskatchewan, Canada.

There he set about applying his considerable energy and creativity, overhauling the Weyburn Mental Hospital. With his colleague, Abram Hoffer, he investigated treatments for mental illness based on dietary changes and large doses of vitamins, and discovered that niacin could aid the treatment of schizophrenia.

Osmond's interest in psychedelics was not confined to the treatment of schizophrenia; under his supervision, architects took LSD and spent time on hospital wards in an attempt to understand what would be the most appropriate environment for a mental patient. Having noted that some alcoholics gave up drink after they suffered from delirium tremens, he gave almost 1,000 alcoholics a high-dose LSD treatment and achieved a 50 per cent recovery rate - far higher than other forms of therapy.

He was also involved in a number of LSD experiments with high profile subjects, such as "authors, artists, a junior cabinet minister, scientists, a hero, philosophers and businessmen". Most of them, he said, "find the experience valuable, some find it frightening, and many say that it is uniquely lovely".

After leaving Saskatchewan, he became director of the Bureau of Research in Neurology and Psychiatry at Princeton, going on to join the University of Alabama Medical School.

His publications include The Chemical Basis of Clinical Psychiatry (with A Hoffer), Psychedelics (with B S Aaronson), and Models of Madness (with

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Humphry Osmond, who died on February 6, is survived by his wife, two daughters and a son.



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