

Saskatchewan

## Psychedelic therapies emerging as mental health treatment in Sask.



Patients say ketamine-assisted psychotherapy has helped a lot



[Will McLernon](#) · CBC News · Posted: Feb 05, 2023 3:00 AM CST | Last Updated: February 5



A staged photo of what preparation for a ketamine infusion looks like at the Linden Medical Centre in Saskatoon. (Retrospect Photography Stephanie Hall)

A staged photo of what preparation for a ketamine infusion looks like at the Linden Medical Centre in Saskatoon. (Retrospect Photography Stephanie Hall) Ketamine is widely known as a party drug, but one Saskatoon mental health clinic is using the substance to help people suffering from mental health conditions.

The Linden Medical Centre offers legal ketamine-assisted psychotherapy for people suffering from depression that can't be treated with more traditional antidepressants. The clinic also offers it to help with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

At the clinic, a psychiatrist assesses the patient prior to treatment and monitors how they respond to the drug.

An anesthesiologist and a trained registered nurse ensure each ketamine infusion is safely delivered.



Dr. Monika Hooper is a psychiatrist at the Linden Medical Centre in Saskatoon. (Submitted by Matthew Hooper)

Dr. Monika Hooper, a psychiatrist at the clinic, said ketamine-assisted psychotherapy work for about 70 per cent of patients.

"[It helps with] the symptoms of depression like energy deficits, motivation deficits, low mood significantly improve," Hooper told CBC Radio's *Blue Sky* host Heather Morrison. "They also notice a functional improvement — they're able to tolerate stressors more."

Hooper said people are starting to open up about using drugs like ketamine, psilocybin or MDMA for mental health treatments, and the stigma isn't as high as it was five to 10 years ago.

"People are starting to look at the research and evidence and see that these are legitimate treatments," Hooper said.

## **Listen to a discussion of psychedelic drugs as mental health treatments on *Blue Sky*:**

**Blue Sky**47:46 Using psychedelic drugs to treat depression, PTSD and anxiety  
On today's Blue Sky we took a look at psychedelic drugs and the way they are being used to treat a variety of mental illness. We heard from Thomas Hartle, a man with terminal cancer who uses psilocybin to ease his end of life anxiety. We heard from two women who use ketamine to help manage depression and PTSD and we were joined by Dr. Monika Hooper from the Linden Medical Centre in Saskatoon to talk about why and how these drugs are used in treatment.

### **'It completely changed my life': patient**

Lesia Pylypchuk said her bipolar disorder was debilitating before she began ketamine-assisted psychotherapy at the clinic last May.

Pylypchuk was diagnosed when she was 35 years old. She then started trying different traditional medications.

"I had gotten to a point where I was able to function again, but I had this nagging low-grade depression," she said. "I had a very flat affect, I had no energy, I couldn't make plans with people because I couldn't guarantee I could make it."



Lesia Pylypchuk began ketamine-infused psychotherapy in May 2022. (Submitted by Lesia Pylypchuk)

Pylypchuk said ketamine treatment changed her life.

"I have no depression at all anymore. I have my life back, I have my personality back," Pylypchuk said.

Pylypchuk emphasized continuing to access other mental health supports while undergoing the treatment. She regularly sees a counsellor to ensure she has a good mindset going into the ketamine treatment, and that it enhances her experience.

Pylypchuk still takes other medication to help treat her bipolar two disorder, but no longer has to also take high doses of antidepressants.

While ketamine-assisted psychotherapy has been effective for Pylypchuk, it isn't cheap.

Pylypchuk says going for treatments every six weeks has cost her thousands of dollars.

"If my mental health is not OK I can't function, so that has to be my number one priority always, and it probably will be for the rest of my life," Pylypchuk said.

- **People living with untreatable depression call on Sask. government to cover ketamine therapy**

Hooper said the costs of the sessions reflects the staff needed to ensure the patient is safe, as there is a risk of decreased level of consciousness and a sudden, severe increase in blood pressure.

### **Overcoming the stigma of psychedelic treatments**

Heather Wale served in the RCMP for 25 years. In 2012, she was diagnosed with severe PTSD, bipolar two disorder and major depressive disorder.

She remembers having suicidal thoughts daily, barely being able to get out of the house and having an explosive temper before beginning ketamine therapy at the Saskatoon clinic almost a year ago.



Heather Wale served in the RCMP for 25 years. She says ketamine-assisted psychotherapy has helped her PTSD, bipolar two disorder and depression. (Submitted by Heather Wale)

Wale said she was wary of the psychedelic treatment at first.

"I was very leery of going on ketamine, I mean that's Special K on the streets, and being a cop and trying to get your head around using this for medical assistance with my mental health [was difficult]," Wale said.

Wale is grateful that her husband researched ketamine-assisted psychotherapy and encouraged her to try it.

"It's just been an experience that changed my life. I don't have suicidal thoughts anymore," Wale said. "Sometimes I go through cycles where I'm depressed, but this helps me bounce back and it keeps me regulated."



Wale comes for ketamine infusions around once in every 10 days. (Retrospect Photography Stephanie Hall)

### **Other psychedelic treatments harder to access**

In the summer of 2020, Thomas Hartle became the first person in Canada to legally try psilocybin — the active ingredient in what are commonly known as "magic mushrooms" — after receiving an exemption from then-minister Patty Hadju.

The 54-year-old Saskatoon man was diagnosed with Stage 4 terminal colon cancer in 2016, and said the drug helps with anxiety about death.

"Even just saying the phrase 'someday I may not be there for my family' used to be so painful for me that I couldn't even get it out without having a real emotional response," Hartle said on CBC Radio's *Blue Sky*.

"[Psilocybin] separates me a little bit from the more painful emotional aspect of it, and allows me to sort of address the way I think about dying as opposed to just masking the feeling."





Thomas Hartle, who has terminal cancer, hopes he can get another exemption to use magic mushrooms in therapy to treat his anxiety. (Don Somers/CBC)

Hartle was able to do three sessions in 2020, but his federal exemption was only good for the year. He applied to renew it in October 2021.

He still hasn't heard back.

- **Terminal cancer patient has waited 440 days for federal permission to continue magic mushroom therapy**

Health Canada said it is "committed to ensuring that all people who need end-of-life care receive the best-possible, high-quality and compassionate support available."

The department said clinical trials and Health Canada's special access program — which allows health-care professionals to request access to restricted drugs that have not yet been authorized for sale in the country — are the preferred options to legally access psychedelic treatments.

"Clinical trials remain the most appropriate way to advance research about products with a possible medical benefit," the statement said.

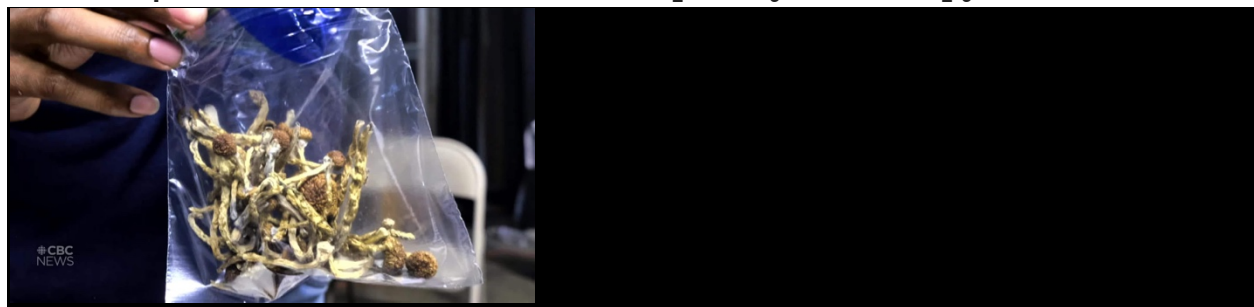
"Both clinical trials and the special access programs have safeguards and requirements in place to protect the health and safety of patients, help ensure the quality of the drug, and provide for administration and oversight by a qualified professional."

Hartle had accessed psilocybin through the federal Special Access Program — but has had trouble continuing treatment.

He said he has had applications denied multiple times.

Hartle once travelled to Jamaica — where psilocybin is legal — to access treatment after having an application denied.

### **WATCH | Saskatoon man discusses his psilocybin therapy:**



Thomas Hartle has been granted the right to use psilocybin to treat anxiety associated with his Stage 4 cancer.

Hartle advocates for easier access to psychedelic mental health treatments for all Canadians.

"What I have sort of experienced is the government has been turning the tap off for different ways of accessing this therapy," Hartle said.

"Unfortunately it's becoming more and more difficult as opposed to being more and more easy."

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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*With files from Blue Sky and Yasmine Ghania*

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/psychedelic-therapies-emerging-mental-health-treatment-1.6729795>