Altasciences, 6605 Merrill Creek Pkwy, Everett, WA 98203, United States
Altasciences.com | contact@altasciences.com

The Psychedelics Race: Emerging Trends, Challenges, and Regulatory Lessons in Psychiatric Drug Development

Beatrice Setnik[1,2], Denise Milovan[1]
[1]Altasciences, QC, Canada; [2] University of Toronto, Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology, ON, Canada

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE

To summarize the evolving landscape of psychedelic drug development, including small-molecule therapeutics designed to isolate neuroplasticity effects from hallucinogenic experiences, and review regulatory lessons from recent pivotal trials.

DESIGN

A case study of MDMA for the treatment of PTSD highlights key regulatory expectations. Psychedelics, currently Schedule I substances, are being investigated for mood, anxiety, and substance use disorders. As these molecules move toward approval and rescheduling, their development and clinical use must address risk mitigation strategies encompassing patient safety, therapy model complexity, long-term safety, abuse potential, perceptions of misuse, diversion risks, and broader societal and ethical considerations.

RESULTS

In June 2024, the FDA Advisory Committee's review of midomafetamine (MDMA) for PTSD underscored concerns regarding trial design, functional unblinding, safety monitoring, and therapist misconduct. The committee voted against approval, and the FDA subsequently issued a Complete Response Letter (August 2024) requiring an additional Phase 3 trial to establish safety and efficacy. In parallel, multiple biotech companies are accelerating development of next-generation psychedelic compounds across Phase 2–3 and early clinical programs, intensifying the race to market. Increasing emphasis is placed on short-acting, non-hallucinogenic neuroplastogens designed for outpatient-friendly dosing, with the dual goals of improving safety and enabling scalable therapeutic delivery.

CONCLUSION

The psychedelic drug development field is rapidly expanding but faces significant regulatory and ethical challenges. Success will require rigorous trial design, effective blinding strategies, robust safety data, and the use of standardized therapeutic models. Future progress hinges on aligning innovation with regulatory expectations and ensuring safe, ethical, and scalable patient access.

BACKGROUND

- Psychedelics are being actively investigated for mood, anxiety, and substance/alcohol use disorders.
- Modern development emphasizes controlled, small-molecule therapeutics that separate neuroplasticity from the acute psychedelic experience.
- Emerging trends: short-acting, outpatient-friendly dosing and non-hallucinogenic neuroplastogens to improve safety and scalability.

DESIGN

Case study of MDMA for PTSD used to highlight regulatory expectations as programs move toward approval and rescheduling.

Key Development Considerations

- Patient safety and long-term safety
- Therapy model complexity and standardization
- Abuse potential, perceptions of misuse/diversion
- Societal and ethical considerations

RESULTS

FDA Psychopharmacologic Drugs Advisory Committee (June 4, 2024) review of midomafetamine (MDMA) for PTSD highlighted concerns about trial design, functional unblinding, safety monitoring, and therapist misconduct.

- **Votes**: Efficacy 2–9 NO Benefit–Risk 1–10 NO
- FDA Complete Response Letter (Aug 2024): an additional Phase 3 trial is required to establish safety and efficacy.

Lessons Learned: MDMA ADCOMM

- High risk of functional unblinding with psychoactive agents; need robust blinding/controls.
- Ensure rigorous safety oversight and independent monitoring (incl. cardiovascular/hepatic risks).
- Standardize therapist/monitor roles; prevent misconduct via training, supervision, and SOPs.
- Capture abuse-related positive effects (euphoria, drug liking, take-again) as AEs to inform risk.
- Pre-specify strategies to mitigate expectancy and placebo effects; consider active/placebo run-ins and statistical adjustments.

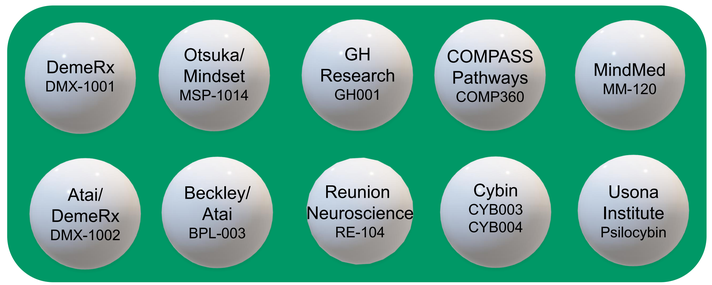
Risk Mitigation Priorities

- Manualized preparation and debriefing (not integration) in healthy volunteer abuse potential studies.
- Standardized training and certification of safety monitors; central review to prevent drift.
- Record monitor IDs; model monitor as factor/covariate in analyses.
- Tailored abuse-potential endpoints: Drug Liking (Emax/AUE), Overall Liking/Take-Again, open-ended probes.
- Robust data integrity processes and independent safety monitoring.
- Clear ethical boundaries and neutral language to avoid therapeutic misconception.

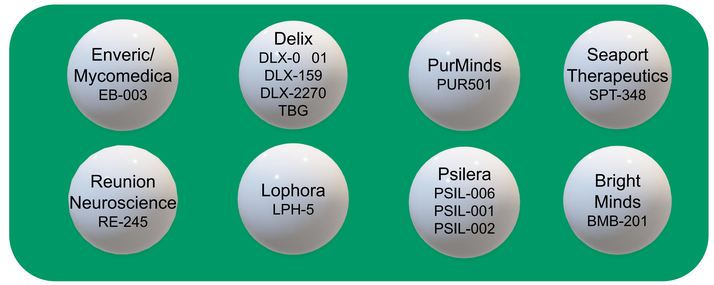
Pipeline Snapshot

Phase 2–3 programs span MDD/TRD, PTSD, SUD/AUD, and anxiety disorders.

Psychedelics in Development:



Next-Generation Focus: Non-Hallucinogenic Neuroplastogens



CONCLUSION

The field is expanding rapidly but faces significant regulatory and ethical challenges.

Success requires:
- Rigorous trial design with effective blinding
- Robust safety data and standardized therapeutic models
- Alignment of innovation (incl. short-acting/non-hallucinogenic agents) with regulatory expectations to enable safe, ethical, scalable access

Disclosures

The viewpoints expressed are those of the authors and not their employer. The authors report no conflicts of interest for this work.