

Dextromethorphan – Poor Man’s LSD?

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The American College of Chest Physicians recently reported the following: **“Over-the-counter cough syrups generally contain drugs in too low a dose to be effective...”** This is in reference, for the most part, to the antitussive drug, dextromethorphan (DXM). This new revelation, along with existing problems, may

bring to question the future of DXM as an over-the-counter product.

The greater controversy over DXM is being stirred by its increasing abuse, by teenagers in particular. More and more reports of abuse, and in some cases associated violent behavior, have been surfacing in the popular media.^{1,2,3} My first encounter with “Robotripping”, a name derived from Robitussin DMTM, a popular cough remedy that contains DXM, was when I was asked by a prosecutor to comment as to the potential effects of DXM abuse in reference to a capital murder case here in Texas.

On March 26th, 2004, the defendant, Andre Thomas, who had a history of abusing CoricidinTM, which contains DXM, and alcohol, kicked in the door to his 20-year-old estranged wife’s apartment and subsequently stabbed her and “ripped out her heart”. Thomas then proceeded to the children’s bedroom where he stabbed and “ripped out the hearts” of his 4-year-old son and his wife’s 13-month-old daughter, fathered by another man. Thomas then placed the hearts in his pocket and went home. Upon his arrest, Mr. Thomas told police that he believed his wife to be Jezebel, his son to be the antichrist, and the 13-month-old girl to be a demon. Several days later while still in police custody, Mr. Thomas tore out his own eye while quoting Mark 9:47: *“And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it*

out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell.”⁴

My subsequent research into DXM abuse yielded a surprising amount of information on the subject, with whole websites, both legitimate and clandestine, being dedicated to this phenomenon. Among the symptoms of DXM intoxication are elevated body temperature, sweating, dry mouth, itchy skin (Robo-itch), numbness, hallucinations, and dissociation. The symptoms can be very much like those experienced under the influence of LSD and some articles also describe a DXM induced psychosis.^{5,6,7}

The prosecutor in the case argued that Mr. Thomas committed the crimes as a result of psychosis induced by a willingly self-administered drug, which offers no defense to prosecution in Texas. Conversely, the defense argued that Mr. Thomas was insane at the time of the crime and had a long history of mentally illness unrelated to drug abuse.

Was Mr. Thomas under the influence of a DXM induced psychosis at the time of the crime? Who knows? I was not retained in the case, probably because I was not willing to opine to a scientific certainty that Mr. Thomas' actions were the result of his drug abuse. The jury, however, rejected his insanity defense and sentenced to him to death.

What we do know is that DXM is readily, legally, and inexpensively available to anyone of any age in over 120 over-the-counter preparations or in its pure form via the internet. The effects of DXM abuse, in particular those of hallucinations, numbness and dissociation are sought after by abusers. Some DXM abusers describe the experience as being dead and “existing as only their thoughts”.⁵ According to the American Association of Poison Control Centers, the number of calls involving abuse or misuse of DXM by teens has more than doubled between the years 2000 and 2003.⁸

In conclusion, with attacks on its efficacy for cough suppression and its increasingly obvious potential for abuse, we may soon see DXM either heading behind the counter with pseudoephedrine or off the market entirely.

1. <http://www.nbc-2.com/articles/readarticle.asp?articleid=3667&z=3&p=>
2. <http://www.kirotv.com/news/4413823/detail.html>
3. Pittsburgh Tribune Review, Wednesday, June 5, 2002
4. The Herald Democrat (Sherman, Texas)
5. Am J Psychiatry 157:304, Feb 2000
6. Journal of Emergency Medicine, Vol 17,2, 285-288
7. Can Med Assoc J 1992: 146 (7)
8. United States Department of Justice, Intelligence Bulletin: DXM (Dextromethorphan), October 2004, Document ID: 2004-L0424-029

