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Methaqualone: the Story of the “Love Drug”

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NOTE: The original 1,000+ page manuscript for *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* had to be cut by more than half before its first publication in 1998. This is an edited excerpt that was deleted from the original manuscript.

Since the 1950s, growing concern about the use of barbiturates for purposes of intoxication had led to the search for non-addicting and non-lethal sedatives. The need for such a drug was periodically underscored by reports of barbiturate-related addiction, accidental overdose, or suicide. Problems related to prescription barbiturate use were increasing visible (as in Marilyn Monroe's 1962 death from a barbiturate overdose) and increased the search for alternative drugs.

New drugs such as meprobamate (Equinil), ethchlorvynol (Placidyl) and Glutethimide (Doriden) vied for this lucrative niche in American medicine, but the rising star that promised effectiveness and safety as a non-barbiturate sedative was methaqualone.

Synthesized in 1951 by M.L. Gujral in India, methaqualone was introduced into American medicine in 1965 by the William H. Rorer pharmaceutical company under the trade name Quaalude. Other trade names for the drug include Sopor and Mecquin.

Methaqualone was approved for prescription use with unlimited refills in 1965 out of the prevailing view that the drug had a

low risks and potential for addiction. Marketed as a non-addicting substitute for barbiturates, Quaalude quickly became one of the top selling sedatives in the country.

By 1968, medical reports of physical dependence, toxicity and overdose deaths produced by methaqualone appeared. One of the most vivid accounts of iatrogenic addiction to methaqualone can be found in *Ludes*, Benjamin Stein's study of a couple's slide into Quaalude addiction.

Methaqualone manufactured in illicit laboratories entered the illicit drug market in the early 1970s, sold on the streets as "Ludes" or "Disco-biscuits." The drug gained popularity as the "love drug," and was often used in combination with alcohol. With accumulating evidence of its illicit use, federal authorities in October 1973 moved methaqualone from Schedule V to Schedule II—a dramatic change in perception of the drug's potential for harm. Excessive use of Quaaludes triggered even harsher local measures. The excessive prescribing of methaqualone through so-called stress clinics led the Florida legislature to move the drug to schedule I—banning its legal use in medicine within the state.