

Mephedrone use is increasing in London

The UK Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, which received Royal Assent on Jan 28, 2016,¹ aims to eradicate the market in new psychoactive substances, but we question how effective the banning of these drugs might be.

The synthetic stimulant mephedrone was one of the first, new psychoactive substances available, emerging around 2007.² It was subsequently classified as a Class B substance in the UK under the Misuse of Drugs Act in April, 2010, and is also controlled in several other countries worldwide.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that mephedrone is rarely used in the USA or Europe as a whole. However, there has been a strong increase in the number of people presenting for mephedrone treatment in England,³ and mephedrone is regularly detected in post-mortem samples analysed at the Toxicology Unit, Imperial College London, from coroners' jurisdictions across London and southeast England.

The number of deaths in which mephedrone was detected in 2015 (n=34, 1.5% of total cases received) has increased since 2014 (n=22, 1.0%). The number of deaths associated with mephedrone is comparable to the number of deaths in which methylenedioxymethylamphetamine (MDMA), an established recreational drug, was detected (n=28, 1.2% of total cases in 2015 and n=25, 1.1% in 2014).

These mephedrone-associated deaths occurred in three distinct user groups. Recreational drug users who take the drug in combination with alcohol or other typical recreational drugs, such as cocaine, amphetamine, or MDMA; intravenous drug users combining mephedrone with heroin; and men who have sex with men (MSM) who combine the drug with γ -hydroxybutyrate and

metamfetamine. In 2015, all mephedrone-associated deaths identified by the Toxicology Unit were in men, 68% of whom were MSM.

The authors of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction report² on the risk assessment of mephedrone in 2011 concluded that the decision to control the drug has the potential to reduce the availability and usage, but could also create an illicit market. Our data suggests that, despite being a controlled substance, mephedrone has remained popular on the London drug scene, and has become an established drug of choice in a diverse population of drug users.

We declare no competing interests.

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- 1 UK Parliament. Psychoactive Substances Act 2016. <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2015-16/psychoactivesubstances.html> (accessed March 22, 2016).
- 2 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. Report on the risk assessment of mephedrone in the framework of the Council Decision on new psychoactive substances. May, 2011. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2011. <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/html.cfm/index116639EN.html> (accessed Jan 12, 2016)
- 3 Public Health England. Adult substance misuse statistics from the National Drug Treatment Monitoring System (NDTMS) 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015. December, 2015. London: Public Health England, 2015. <https://www.ndtms.net/Publications/downloads/Adult%20Substance%20Misuse/adult-statistics-from-the-national-drug-treatment-monitoring-system-2014-2015.pdf> (accessed Jan 12, 2016).