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Call for Controls on “Herbal Highs” and “Legal Party Pills”

Uncontrolled promotion, sale and use of so-called “Herbal Highs” (legal party pills), NOS (nitrous oxide) and other inhalants are endangering lives and the health of young people and there should be restrictions and control on their sale, said Cate Kearney, manager of Alcohol and Drug Association (ADANZ) and the Alcohol & Drug Helpline.

The ADA’s submission to the Government Health Committee considering the Misuse of Drugs Amendment Bill (No 3), which is looking at whether such substances should face restrictions, is to go before the Committee (this) week.

“There’s been growing concern among alcohol and drug sector professionals that the rapid increase in the use of herbal highs and party pills containing BZP (benzylpiperzine) and volatile inhalants such as NOS, are causing personal and social harm,” Kearney said.

“More and more young people are presenting at emergency departments requiring admission and observation because of the effects of using these substances, especially when in combination with alcohol or cannabis.”

The submission pointed out how easy it was for young people to buy these substances, which were promoted as herbal to make people think they were harmless natural products, when in fact they were synthetic and could be harmful.

“You can’t walk through city streets without being bombarded with advertising for these substances. You can even get them from corner dairies now. So people who would never normally touch drugs are buying them, thinking they are harmless, when they are not,” Kearney said.

The ADA submission has called for restrictions on advertising, sale of and access to “Herbal Highs” or legal party drugs, as well as to solvents containing mind altering products such as butane, glue, petrol, NOS and nitrites.

“We want these products to be restricted in the same way as tobacco, so that the products cannot be openly displayed or advertised, and cannot be sold to people under 18. Because there are no age restrictions on who can buy these products, there is a particular concern for older children and teenagers,” she said. “And we want the labels on these products to point out the dangers of use and abuse, and the risks of combining them with alcohol or cannabis.”

Kearney said that manufacturers and suppliers had marketed party pills as dietary supplements, getting around the law and increasing their attractiveness to

those people who avoided other legal drugs such as alcohol. They were also being promoted as safer and cheaper than illegal stimulants such as methamphetamine (speed) and ecstasy.

“Advertising has been used as a devious mechanism to impel or seduce people to purchase and consume herbal highs, which are now increasingly accepted by young people,” she said.

“People who may not normally use illegal substances but are part of the party culture are being drawn into using herbal highs under the misconception that they are not only legal but healthy, natural and safe.”

Nitrous oxide, or NOS, was also increasingly accepted by young people as a cheap and legal high, Kearney said.

Like party pills, NOS canisters are easily available at convenience stores, bars and night clubs. NOS offers a fleeting feeling of pleasure of less than a minute, meaning that users will inhale often to have a more lasting effect. This type of use can increase tolerance, requiring even greater intake.

Effects include belligerence, apathy, impaired judgement and functioning, while long-term use can range from mental dysfunction to severe dementia.

BZP (herbal highs) has a stimulating effect on the central nervous system, leading to the attractive effects of taking herbal high pills - feelings of euphoria and intense energy that can last for six hours or more.

However, the National Poisons centre has said that significant toxicity can occur from taking BZP, with effects ranging from agitation and paranoia to seizure, blood clotting, erratic heart beat, coma and even death. The range of likely harm increases, and extends to other people, when herbal highs are used to augment other drugs such as alcohol and cannabis. Harm to others can occur when the user drives, becomes disoriented, or has an existing psychological condition.

“We know that our recommendations for restrictions and controls will not address all the problems associated with the use of herbal highs and inhalants that are causing concern to those who work in the area of alcohol and other drugs,” Kearney said. “However, it is hoped that increased restrictions will lead to a reduction in the harms identified.”

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