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Multiple health risk behaviours

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Multiple health risk behaviours

Abstract
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an exploration of the broader implications for the police and the community.

**Discussion and Conclusion:** The opportunity to facilitate discussion regarding effective supply reduction strategies, investigative methodologies and policing responses in this area is essential to ensure an effective national response to cannabinoidodimetic drugs and the broader field of emerging psychoactive substances. It is anticipated that the presentation will facilitate discussion about the challenges faced by law enforcement in responding to this issue and inform future policing and community responses within other jurisdictions.

**PRESENTATION 2 – UNDERSTANDING SYNTHETIC CANNABIS: WHO USES IT, WHY DO THEY USE IT, WHAT ARE THE HARMs, AND WHAT ARE THE POLICY OPTIONS?**

**STEPHEN J. BRIGHT, MONICA J. BARRATT**

**Issues:** Synthetic cannabis products are increasingly reported as an emerging drug class in Australia and internationally. This paper will review patterns of use and harms, characteristics of users, reasons for use, and policy responses to synthetic cannabinoids and synthetic cannabis products.

**Approach:** Synthesis of the authors’ published work using online surveys of synthetic cannabis users and discourse analysis of media representations and policy responses to synthetic cannabis. A comprehensive review of the Australian literature and key international literature.

**Key Findings:** While there is evidence of synthetic cannabis being used in Australia as early as 2005, there was a rapid increase in use during 2011, coinciding with increased media reporting and subsequent legislative responses. Synthetic cannabis users surveyed can be characterised as cannabis users who were curious about the effects of ‘fake weed’ and/or were interested in using a legal cannabis-like product within a context of cannabis prohibition. Most commonly reported harms include fast or irregular heartbeat, dissociation, dizziness and paranoia, and these were more common among younger males, ‘bong’ smokers and concurrent alcohol drinkers. Synthetic cannabis users overwhelmingly prefer to use ‘natural’ cannabis. Reviews indicate increasingly harmful effects of newer synthetic cannabinoids, including harms not seen with natural cannabis (e.g. seizures).

**Discussion and Conclusions:** Banning individual substances may increase harm through increased media attention and the subsequent introduction of lesser known substances that might be more harmful than both the banned substances and the original substitute (‘natural’ cannabis). The effectiveness of banning whole classes of substances is as yet unclear.

**PRESENTATION 3 – AN ONLINE SURVEY OF THE SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF WITHDRAWAL FROM SYNTHETICS VERSUS BUSH/HYDRO CANNABIS**

**JOHN HOWARD, BRYAN TRAN**

**Issues:** It is unknown whether the subjective experience of withdrawal from synthetic cannabinoids is similar to that for ‘bush’ and ‘hydro’ botanical cannabis.

**Approach:** This online study explored use of cannabis and synthetic cannabinoids, and symptoms experienced when withdrawing from ‘bush’, ‘hydro’ and ‘synthetics’.

**Key Findings:** Analyses of initial 93 surveys found: mean age 38, 36% female, from metropolitan (62%), regional (27%) and rural/remote (11%) areas. Participants had experience with a wide range of drugs: alcohol (98%), tobacco (96%), 3,4-methylenedioxyn-N-methylamphetamine (MDMA) (76%), Amphetamines (74%), cocaine (63%), non-prescribed benzodiazepines (53%) and opioids (43%). All reported use of ‘bush’, 98% ‘hydro’, and 56% had tried synthetic cannabinoids, with 15% using them in the last month. Only 7% of participants reported being routinely drug tested, and 3% using synthetics to avoid drug detection; most frequently cited reasons for use being curiosity (33%), purported legality (17%) and perceived desirable effects (9%). For ‘bush’ and ‘hydro’, reasons for use were mainly positive effects, relaxation and to aid sleep. Almost half (45%) of participants were unsure if synthetic cannabinoids were legal in their area, 24% believed them to be legal and 31% illegal. Most had attempted to quit or reduce their use. An expanded Cannabis Withdrawal Scale indicated that reported withdrawal symptoms appeared to be most intense for ‘hydro’, then ‘bush’, and least for ‘synthetics’.

**Discussion and Conclusions:** Findings reflect anecdotal reports that many who try synthetic cannabinoids are dissatisfied, or worried by the effects they experience, and withdrawal experiences may be associated with the shorter length and less frequent use.

**Discussion Section:**

**Discussants:** Fiona Patten, Executive Officer, Eros Association (fiona@eros.org.au) and Stewart Bell, Commissioner for Mine Safety and Health, Queensland Government. The aim is to provide reflections on issues raised, and to invite participant interaction. The issues surrounding synthetic cannabinoids remain complex, but it is hoped that the presentations, reflections and participant interaction will better inform the debate surrounding policy and legislative responses.

**Implications for Policy:** Legislative responses must consider the use of synthetic cannabinoids alongside the use of ‘botanical’ cannabis. New and innovative approaches to policy are required to reduce any drug-related harm.