

Supplementary Order Paper 298
Misuse of Drugs Amendment Bill (No 3)

**ADA's SUBMISSION TO THE
HEALTH COMMITTEE**

INTRODUCTION

The Alcohol Drug Association (ADA) is a not for profit organisation and has been operating in the Canterbury region since 1982. ADA's statement of purpose is *Providing information, challenging thinking and stimulating action on alcohol and other drug issues*".

ADA brings people/professionals working in the South Island AOD sector together to network, share and disseminate the latest information. We provide leadership and an informed voice for the AOD sector. ADA also manages the national Alcohol&Drug Helpline.

ADA oversees the maintenance and development of the National Directory of Alcohol and Drug Services, which is updated annually. Other activities include active co-ordination and networking with the Alcohol and Drug field through Liaison On Alcohol and Drug (LOAD) meetings; regional consumer advisor; and District Health Board liaison.

The first part of this submission begins with this introduction then a statement of position followed by the key messages that ADA wish to impart to the Health Committee followed by the recommendations.

The second section identifies the substances of concern. Under the heading of Herbal Highs/Legal Party Pills is a description and the possible harms associated with their use. The concern regarding advertising and the impact it has is highlighted. Inhalants are then identified and their effects described including why their use is attractive followed by the harms associated with their use.

Statement of Position

The following responses are to the proposed regulatory controls included in the Supplementary Order Paper 298 Misuse of Drugs Amendment Bill (No 3).

This submission includes and is based on increasing concerns and comments expressed by the alcohol and drug (AOD) sector and allied professionals in the South Island regarding the harm resulting from the increased use of 'herbal highs' or substances containing benzylpiperzine (BZP) similar piperzines and

related substances; inhalants including butane gas, nitrous oxide, nitrites and glue, aerosol propellants , petrol and similar substances.

This submission supports the proposed amendments; that the “New Part 3 Restricted Substances” be added to the Misuse of Drugs Amendment Bill (No 3).

Key Messages

- That the uncontrolled access and use of ‘herbal highs’ or substances containing benzylpiperzine (BZP) and similar piperzines and related substances can lead to personal and social harm contrary to how these substances are represented in their marketing and advertising.
- The need for more balanced product information available to the public and in particular consumers of ‘herbal high’ substances and volatile inhalants.
- More research is required into the effects of long term use of ‘herbal highs’ or any substances’ containing benzylpiperzine (BZP) and similar piperzines is required.
- That the uncontrolled access and use of butane gas, nitrous oxide, nitrites and volatile solvents also known as inhalants such as glue, aerosols, petrol and similar substances can lead to short term and ongoing physical, psychological and social harm and death. There have been 6 deaths related to the use of these substances in the last year.
- The lack of control or restrictions regarding the production, advertising, labelling, purchasing of the substances identified, provides inadequate safeguards and has set the scene for a substantial increase in overall use of ‘herbal high’ substances. The Expert Advisory Committee on Drugs identified that during 2003 there were up to 1.5 million doses of herbal high products produced.
- Restrictions are required on the access and sale of the substances identified in this submission because there are a growing number of young people presenting at emergency departments who require admission and observation because of the effects of using these substances often in combination with other substances such as alcohol and or cannabis.
- The ease of access to many inhalants is often an attractive factor for young people experimenting with mind altering substances. Because of this purchasing, storage and labelling restrictions are required to reduce the harm and number of deaths associated with the misuse of inhalants.

Recommendations

It is strongly recommended that

- access to, advertising, the sale of and purchasing of substances known as 'herbal highs or legal party pills' be restricted to the same or similar level to that of tobacco products. For example but not only, that the product cannot be openly displayed or advertised; that the product cannot be sold to people under the age 18 years.
- If advertising is not completely restricted, that education and information at the point of sale must be available to balance the impact of advertising in regard to the herbal highs being a healthy alternative to illegal drugs and substances

It is further recommended that purchase restrictions are put in place to

- reduce / restrict access to
 - household products such as and including sprays requiring propellants, aerosols and cleaners containing mind altering substances
 - volatile solvents such as and including butane gas, glue and petrol
 - nitrous oxide
 - nitrites
 - and all similar substances.

that labels include

- prominent suggestions for appropriate safe storage
- warnings of the dangers associated to uses other than those identified.
- chemical make up of the substance especially the psychoactive component.
- any associated risks when taking the substance with other chemicals or mind/mood altering drugs such as alcohol or cannabis
- possible negative psychological, psychiatric or physical effects

SUBSTANCES OF CONCERN

The following section includes information on substances that have been identified as causing concern because of the increasing use and harms that are becoming more evident with increasing use.

Substances of concern include 'herbal highs' or 'legal' party pills, nitrous oxide or other volatile solvents also known as inhalants and nitrites.

Herbal Highs/Legal Party Pills and BZP

Commonly referred to as 'legal' party pills and 'herbal' highs, they are pills containing the substance benzylpiperzine (BZP). While BZP is not currently used therapeutically, it is misused recreationally. BZP is the substance that has a stimulating effect on the central nervous system in particular the cerebral cortex, medullary respiratory centre and reticular activating system of the brain.

BZP is believed to have a similar but less potent action to the hallucinogenic-amphetamines such as ecstasy and speed: it leads to the same chemical changes in the brain i.e., stimulating the production of serotonin and dopamine. The attractive effects of taking herbal high pills are feelings of euphoria and intense energy that can last up to 6 hours.

Possible Harm of Consuming Herbal Highs

The National Poisons Centre information on BZP points out that it is considered to possess mild hallucinogenic amphetamine-like effects and that it would be unusual for serious toxicity to occur. However, significant toxicity may occur independent of dose.

Moderate effects include

- agitation
- paranoia and
- anxiety

Complications of severe toxicity include

- fulminant (sudden) hyperthermia
- seizure
- disseminated intravascular coagulation (blood clotting in the small blood vessels of vital organs leading to organ failure)
- cardiac dysrhythmia (erratic heart beat)
- coma
- death

The range of likely harm increases and is likely to be extended to other people when herbal highs are used to augment other drugs such as alcohol and cannabis. BZP affects emotion, perceptions of ability and physical senses, and people's rational decision making ability will be changed. Potentially harmful behaviors and outcomes can be exacerbated when BZP is taken in conjunction with other substances and the effect can lead to

- Disorientation leading to accidental harm to self or others

- Driving and use of machinery leading to accidental harm to self or others
- The potential for BZP to pre-empt a psychotic episode if a person is predisposed to a psychiatric condition
- Weight loss and anorexic capacity has also been associated with feelings of euphoria resulting from the use of amphetamine like substances such as BZP

Concern continues to be expressed because of the increasing number of young people presenting at accident and emergency departments. Early in 2004 doctors from Dunedin Hospital reported that five young people were admitted experiencing what appeared to be the side effects of taking herbal highs. It has also been pointed out by Christchurch Hospital staff that a number of young people have presented at the Accident and Emergency Department in varying states of hysteria experiencing paranoia and requiring admission for observation and their safety after having consumed herbal highs.

North Island hospitals have reported the necessity to increase staff to cope with influx of young people who have taken various 'legal' substances in conjunction with other drugs such as alcohol and cannabis.

It is recommended that labels must carry information outlining the

- Chemical make up of the substance especially the psychoactive component
- any associated risks when augmenting the substance with other chemicals or mind/mood altering drugs such as alcohol or cannabis
- possible negative psychological, psychiatric or physical effects

Education and information at the point of sale must be available to balance the impact of advertising in regard to the herbal highs being a healthy alternative to illegal drugs and substances.

Advertising and Marketing of Herbal Highs

Advertising is used not only to inform and offer choice but can be used as a devious mechanism to impel or seduce people to purchase and consume, in this case herbal highs. Advertising also sells ideas with or without products and influences culture and the behaviour of people.

Research provides evidence that advertising does influence the positive emotional responses to and beliefs about the product particularly in young people. This can be seen in the increasing acceptance of the use of herbal highs by many young people

- Anecdotal evidence shows that all age groups but particularly young people are choosing to use herbal highs because of the healthy portrayal of them in their advertising and marketing.
- The increasing availability of herbal highs from dairies, service stations and convenience shops, the types of shops that sell food and snacks and that are outlets frequented by young people. Such access increases the normative associations and acceptance of herbal highs.
- Use of language and words to describe and sell these drugs are misleading. Words such as herbal suggest natural, healthy and safe and do not suggest synthetic combinations of chemicals, when in fact they are.
- For people who would not use illicit drugs and choose not use alcohol, the word legal is persuasive particularly for young people who are conscious of the health issues with alcohol use and the legal issues with ecstasy, speed or cannabis.

The increased advertising for various named/branded 'herbal highs' exposes people and especially young people and children, to herbal highs and may mean that herbal highs become part of their social culture whether chosen or not.

Although the Social Tonic Association and others in the herbal high industry may identify the right to advertise from a powerful position and financial advantage, so too, the rights of individuals and families to not have mind altering substances or their image and branding brought into their homes should also be considered and advocated for as the power difference is significant.

It is recommended that the advertising and sponsorship restrictions that apply to tobacco be applied to herbal highs.

It is further recommended that the age restrictions that apply for purchasing tobacco be the same for purchasing substances that contain BZP and similar piperzines.

Inhalants

It is difficult to classify the broad range of chemicals found in hundreds of different products that may have different pharmacological effects. But generally, inhalants are described as breathable chemical vapors that produce psychoactive (mind-altering) effects.

Inhalants are likely to fall into the categories of solvents, gases and nitrites and can include the following:

Solvents

- *Industrial or household solvents or solvent-containing products*, including paint thinners or removers, degreasers, dry-cleaning fluids, gasoline, and glue
- *Art or office supply solvents*, including correction fluids, felt-tip-marker fluid, and electronic contact cleaners

Gases

- *Gases used in household or commercial products*, including butane lighters and propane tanks, whipped cream aerosols or dispensers (whippets), and refrigerant gases
- *Household aerosol propellants* and associated solvents in items such as spray paints, hair or deodorant sprays, fabric protector sprays, and aerosol computer cleaning products
- *Medical anesthetic gases*, such as ether, chloroform, halothane, and nitrous oxide ("laughing gas").

Nitrites

Organic nitrites are volatiles that include cyclohexyl, butyl, and amyl nitrites, and are commonly known as "poppers." Amyl nitrite is still used for medical purposes. Volatile nitrites are often sold in small brown bottles and labeled as "video head cleaner," "room odorizer," "leather cleaner".

Young children and adolescents can easily obtain inhalants and are among those most likely to abuse toxic substances in household products. However a fact that is further fuelling concern is the increasing acceptance of the use of these substances to enhance the effects of other drugs such as alcohol.

There is also the increasing accessibility to inhalants such as nitrous oxide in commercial and social settings such as convenience stores, bars and night clubs. Nitrous oxide is the most likely of the gases to be abused. Also known as NOS it is most commonly sold in dairies, convenience stores and increasingly, 'party pill' or 'herbal high' shops.

The Attractive Aspects of Using Inhalants

Apart from the nitrites which do not have an anaesthetic effect, the attractive aspects of using inhalants are that they relax the body and depress the Central Nervous System slowing down mental and physical responses. The heart rate also slows and this can increase the risk of heart failure. Nitrites dilate blood flow and reportedly improve sexual pleasure.

The solvent toluene is found in many of the commonly abused inhalants such as glue, paint, nail polish removers, paint sprays. Research shows that toluene activates the dopamine system which is the neurotransmitter associated with the reward effects of many drugs.

Possible Harm from Inhaling Solvents

The debilitating and lethal effects of inhalants although unlikely, but can occur even with first use and include

- Sudden death syndrome, usually caused by the irregular heart rate induced by inhalant use
- hypotension (low blood pressure)
- tachycardia (rapid heart beat)
- bradycardia (slow heart beat)

Other significant effects may include

- coma
- seizures
- brain damage
- and lead poisoning

Although patterns of use in New Zealand affect a relatively small but growing group, there are approximately three deaths per year due to Sudden Death Syndrome associated with solvent abuse.

The effects of most inhalants are similar to alcohol, often instant initial excitation followed by drowsiness, disinhibition, light headedness and agitation. Because the initial effect of excited-ness last for only 30-60 seconds people often take a number of consecutive hits for increased effect; this type of use is likely to increase tolerance. It follows that tolerance from high use also means people will continue to increase their intake to get the desired effect.

Effects that can lead to accidents related to impaired judgment, lack of motor skills, or high-risk behavior include

- Belligerence
- Apathy
- Impaired judgment
- Impaired functioning in work or social situations
- Lethargy
- Depressed reflexes

- Weakness

Additional inhalant dangers are

- suffocation from using bags
- fire-related injuries from inhalants is combustion especially if the inhalants are heated or a cigarette is lit in a closed area where the inhalants is being abused

Long-term Effects of Inhalant Abuse

People who abuse inhalants chronically have demonstrated a range of mental dysfunction, from mild cognitive impairment (e.g., lack of concentration or attention, poor memory, and poor learning skills) to severe dementia. However, studies often have not been able to answer whether or to what extent neurological dysfunction existed before inhalant abuse. It is not clear whether the neurological effects of inhalant abuse are permanent or transitory.

Emotional problems, including violent behavior, and mental disorders, particularly antisocial personality disorders and depression, have been associated with inhalant abuse but there is no plausible evidence at this time that inhalant abuse actually causes psychiatric conditions in any direct way.

It is agreed that the recommendations included in this submission will not address all the problems associated with the abuse of the herbal highs and the inhalants identified as causing concern to those who work in the area of alcohol and other drug however, it is hoped that with the increased restrictions there will be a reduction in the harms that have been identified.

Note:

A list of references will be available if requested.