



Ecstasy victims;
some of the
estimated 693
people who have
died from the
drug in the UK

It was July 1989 and, to use the iconic phrase of the ecstasy era's best chronicler Matthew Collin, Britain was entering an 'altered state'. We were 'jacking' to Acid House, the second summer of love was in full swing and the 'designer drug' ecstasy was about to claim its first public victim.

Claire Leighton, a 16-year-old who had just finished her GCSEs, set off from Cannock in Staffordshire on July 7th, 1989. She was high on hope and on her way with her boyfriend to rock to the beat at the coolest club in the UK, Manchester's Hacienda.

It was an experimental time. Electronic music was still very much underground and ecstasy was becoming a pre-internet word-of-mouth drug sensation.

A few stories poked up in a largely ignorant media. A tale, headlined 'Calling card of a deadly salesman', appeared in the *South Wales Echo* in January 1986. It described a mysterious man seen cruising the clubs, on a messianic mission to introduce the Welsh youth to an incredible new experience.

"We could hardly believe it. We have seen drug-pushers before but nobody quite like this," the paper quoted a 27-year-old club-goer. "He was wearing a pin-striped suit as he walked around handing out leaflets. He was aged about 45 to 50 and had receding hair. He said he didn't have the drug on him but wanted us to read the leaflets. He said he would come back later if people wanted any," the clubber continued.

The 22-page booklet contained articles from US magazines on the use of ecstasy. One nonsense quote, according to the article, read: 'You are in a pure space of non-thinking...this is the Nirvana that all Saints and Masters talk about'. Inspector John Wake of the South Wales Drug Squad told the *Echo*: "We believe it can lead to death. It would be an act of extreme stupidity to try it."

Claire was willing to risk it. Tens of thousands were. Two weeks before she made that trip to the Hacienda, the M25 orbital parties were reaching a critical mass.

"Masterminded by mystery men

using yuppie mobile telephones," according to *The Sun*, 11,000 'ravers' turned up to White Waltham airfield, near Maidenhead. It was "Ecstasy airport!" They were so off their heads, according to *The Mirror*, they were "ripping the heads off pigeons". Oddly, *The Sun* described the drug as "an opium concentrate which can boost sex-drive with side-effects of paranoia."

Claire took a single pill of ecstasy at around 10pm. Shortly after midnight she collapsed while dancing inside the club and died 36 hours later. The story did not even reach the local news. A few days later, DJ Dave Haslam, who did Thursday's Temperance nights at the Hacienda, told me: "You're a journalist, you should write something about this. A girl died in here after taking E last week and they are not talking about it and I don't think it's right."

THE ONLY ECSTASY DEATH REPORTED IN THE LAST THREE MONTHS, OF A 31-YEAR-OLD MOTHER FROM BLACKPOOL IN APRIL, MERITED JUST 66 WORDS IN THE DAILY STAR

I checked out the story and called the nationals. The following day it was front page of every tabloid, a frowning 'Smiley' face to illustrate the scary reality.

Claire's body had ballooned in weight. Her mother Janet Leighton recalled: "Her hands were massive. I remember thinking if you pricked her with a pin she would burst."

The pathologist gave her cause of death as generalised haemorrhage, disseminated intravascular coagulation (blood coagulating where it shouldn't) and ingestion of methylenedioxymethamphetamine - ecstasy.

While noting her allergic reaction to the drug was unusual, the coroner concluded: "This is the first [death] but

regrettably it is not likely to be the last."

Fifteen years later, in 2004, I asked the late Tony Wilson, then co-owner of Factory Records and the Hacienda nightclub with the group New Order, what had happened in the days after Claire's death.

"We had the usual crisis meeting," Wilson recalled. "There was a feeling of, 'Why us, why our dancefloor?'" he said. "First of all there was revulsion and tragedy and sadness. That kind of death is pretty awful. None of us knew about ecstasy deaths then - the idea that someone's body boils. And also we didn't understand the repercussions. Complete underestimation."

In fact, Claire's death was actually the third ecstasy-related death but the first two had failed to hit the headlines.

In *Altered State*, Matthew Collin reported: "Britain's second ecstasy death (the first was 20-year-old Ian Larcombe, who had swallowed a bag of 18 tablets and suffered a fatal heart attack after being stopped by police on the way to a club in June 1988) appeared to validate the panic."

"On 28 October 1988, Janet Mayes, a 21-year-old nanny, took two ecstasy pills, one more than usual, at a party at the Jolly Boatman pub in Hampton Court, Surrey. She collapsed and was dead on arrival at hospital. Her parents symbolically burned her Smiley T-shirt, flares and beads, declaring them evil. The man who sold her the drugs was sentenced to 180 hours of community service."

Christopher Scrimshaw died, aged 19, in Portsmouth on July 6, 1991. Inquest notes from the time make grim reading.

Coroner's officer: *You remember seeing that his face was looking sallow and his eyes were rolling up?*

Stephen Holdsworth (friend): Yes.

CO: *And you said something to Chris like 'You're a bit of a mess. You'd better take it easy.'*

SH: Yes I did.

CO: *And at that point did Chris say to you 'I'm alright, I feel brilliant.'*

SH: Yes he did.

The next time Holdsworth saw his friend was being brought out of the club



by ambulance officers on a stretcher. He died in hospital.

Pathologist: "There were haemorrhages on the membranes covering the heart and some haemorrhage to the wall of the heart itself. The air passages showed grayish discolouration throughout much of their length. The lungs were deeply congested, the lobes being almost airless. My conclusion is that he did die of cardio-respiratory failure due to the ingestion of MDMA."

CO: "There is in the literature a small number of cases in which the cause of death appears to be an adverse reaction following the consumption of just one or two tablets of MDMA. Which suggests that any quantity of this drug being consumed could in fact be very dangerous"

Pathologist: Yes sir.

But it wasn't until 1995, after more than 50 deaths – the figures are difficult to ascertain due to a lack of accurate data – that the whole country sat up and took notice. Leah Betts' death caused a wave of reaction against the drug and its surrounding sub-culture. A new generation grew up to government health warnings that 'Ecstasy Kills'.

From here on, with controlled data collection, we have a much clearer picture of dangers, deaths and trends. Conclusions drawn over the last decade show a typical ecstasy victim as young and otherwise healthy, employed, not known as a drug addict and misusing ecstasy with cocaine and alcohol.

In a report presented to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs last year, Fabrizio Schifano, of the National Programme of Substance Abuse Deaths (Np-SAD) based at St George's Hospital Medical School, University of London showed that within the period 1997-2007 there were 527 ecstasy-related deaths. John Corkery, Np-SAD project manager, exclusively told *Druglink* that including ecstasy deaths for before 1997, the total figure is 693, although this is a minimum estimate based on coroners' death certificates.

The notable change from early trends is that ecstasy moved on from being a single dose party drug to simply an ingredient in a cocktail of hedonism.

Matt Southwell, a founder member of the users group, the Dance Drugs

Alliance, is now working with Inpud, the International Network of People who Use Drugs.

He claims that today the principle dangers for ecstasy users are mixing with cocaine, caffeine and alcohol, lack of hydration and club staff's "low dance safety awareness".

"People are routinely drinking alongside taking E. In my day people would question that. If you had a bottle of beer in your hand, people would suggest it was a bad idea. The new generation is a hugely poly drug-taking generation. They start with everything at the same time, rather than having a drug 'career'.

"Because the price has dropped so much, to around £2.50 a pill, it doesn't seem so much a big deal to take ecstasy. People take it just going down the pub. It's a much more integrated drug."

Schifano's analysis seems to back up Southwell's take on the scene.

Of the 527 deaths, a fifth (109) involved ecstasy alone. It had caused death through an excess accumulation of water in the brain (cerebral oedema), excessive body temperature (hyperpyrexia), blood-clotting and multiple organ failure.

The number of annual deaths in the UK peaked at 75 in 2001, and has since dropped to an average of between 54 and 63 a year. The annual death toll from ecstasy simply doesn't make the headlines anymore. The only ecstasy death reported in the last three months, of a 31-year-old mother from Blackpool in April, merited just 66 words in the *Daily Star*.

The effects of long-term use have been hotly debated. A landmark study in 2002 claimed that a single night of using ecstasy could cause serious brain damage and Parkinson's disease. Dr George Ricaurte of the John Hopkins University reported "severe dopaminergic neurotoxicity" in primates.

But a year later Hopkins admitted that he 'mistakenly' gave methamphetamines to the monkeys used in the study, and not MDMA.

Whatever the real reason behind Hopkins' 'mistake', Southwell is adamant that the drinks industry was canny in

winning back water-drinking clubbers. "We have a generation of binge drinkers. The cultural barrier has really shifted. The aspiration of young people today is to get out of their faces. The government has been as naïve on alcohol as they have been on drugs."

The United Nations world drug report 2009 estimates that between 12 and 24 million people worldwide used ecstasy at least once in 2007. UK government figures estimate 730,000 people in the UK took ecstasy in the last year. Or at least pills which are sold as ecstasy. The MDMA content of most has halved since the early 90s, according to studies, which partly explains their use today as a mixer.

While crystal MDMA and powder – more reliable forms of MDMA – have grown in popularity, pills are still the most popular form of ingestion. But they are also the easiest to adulterate.

The amphetamine-like drug BZP, a piperazine, has been steadily replacing MDMA in pills sold as ecstasy, as reported in *Druglink* last year.

One drug forum user bemoaned last month that "there is no MDMA is this country to be honest, all the stuff you are seeing now are piperazines."

It's all a far cry from the heady days of the 80s and 90s. The nostalgic original generation are set to pour out their collective memories. Two new documentary films – *They Call It Acid* and *High on Hope* – are due for release. And Collins' seminal book *Altered State: The Story of Ecstasy Culture And Acid House* is re-issued on July 9.

Looking back, in the introduction to the new edition, Collins notes: "Millions of pills have been swallowed since it was first published, but scientists still can't agree whether or not it causes any serious damage to the human body and brain, while attempts to restrict recreational drug use have almost always failed. Two decades on, the fallout from ecstasy culture – social, political, legal and medical – continues to cause controversy."

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