Whatever happened to ‘glue-sniffing?’

Although technically incorrect, the expression gained traction with the media when the practice was at its height back in the 1980s. But whatever you call it, the misuse of solvents has dropped off the radar. By Richard Ives and Nicola Morgan

It may come as a surprise to many people to reveal that volatile solvent abuse (VSA) (including adhesives and butane lighter fuel) has killed more young people under the age of 16, over the past twenty years, than all the Class A drugs put together. They were in fact, the first legal highs.

Prevalence statistics for VSA are essentially limited to surveys of young people. The NHS Information Centre’s Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England report shows that VSA has declined among young people aged 11 to 15 years over the last 10 years. In 2001, 7.1% of young people reported misusing a volatile substance in the last year, compared to 3.5% in 2011. It is worth noting that volatile substances are reported as second only to cannabis for this group, and in the younger age groups (11, 12 and 13-years-olds) solvents still have the highest percentage of misuse. Statistics for adult misuse of solvents had been collected in the Home Office’s Drug misuse declared (part of the British crime survey) but were dropped in 2011 because of the need to collect data on new psychoactive substances. The percentage of adults aged 16 to 59 years old reporting previous year use of ‘glues’ was consistently at 0.1% or 0.2% since 1996.

One of the reasons that we don’t hear much about this these days, although nitrous oxide has become fashionable accompanied by the tragic death of a seventeen year old in October) has been the steep decline in the number of deaths; they have fallen from an average of just over 100 per year in the early 1990s to an average of 48 per year in the last five years on record (2004 to 2008). And indeed, the decline in deaths can be construed as a prevention success story – a range of different organisations have undertaken activities to address the problem: and, it seems, with some success.

But the statistics tell a more complex story; while deaths among young people have declined, the proportion of adults has increased significantly since 2005. In the period 1971- 2005, just over half of all deaths were attributable to those aged 18 and over, during 2006-2007, the percentage had jumped to nearly 90%.

The recorded history of volatile substance abuse (VSA) in the UK started in the 1970s, although before then there were sniffers – for example, 1950s army draftees sniffing button cleaning fluid, and even further back, in the nineteenth century the use of ‘laughing gas’ (nitrous oxide) to achieve intoxication by such scientific luminaries as Humphry Davy, which as I have noted, has made something of a comeback through the use of whipped cream canisters.

But it wasn’t until the 1980s that there was considerable public and political concern about the issue; then, the Department of Health funded a research project to identify the deaths related to VSA. This was necessary as VSA-related deaths were not always identified in drug-related deaths statistics. That research project, Trends in UK deaths associated with abuse of volatile substances, continued until 2009, producing an annual report which received wide-spread media coverage and helped ensure that the issue was kept on the agenda. It is a big loss and a disappointment that the work is no longer funded.

Also back in the 1980s, in response to the misuse of glues, the British Adhesives and Sealants Association, with a Director seconded from Staffordshire glue manufacturer, Evo-de, established a charity to tackle the problem. From their head office, still based in Staffordshire today, Re-Solv continues to take action across a wide spectrum, aiming to support those affected by VSA, campaign for more effective services and better information, undertake and encourage research to identify the issues more clearly, and generally to ensure that there is a response to the problem.

Re-Solv is currently running one
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has explored the effectiveness of some of the school-based interventions that Re-Solv undertakes. Findings from a small survey indicate positive and lasting changes in pupil attitudes associated with this educational work.

Another strand of the work is to pull out more VSA information from existing surveys. We are building on a paper that analysed published VSA data from the European School Project on Alcohol and Drugs (ESPAD) surveys of 2007 and 2011, and(392,36),(609,721)

Solve-It (www.solveitonline.co.uk) was established by a mother whose son died from inhaling aerosols, and has provided help for those misusing VSAs and for those affected, as well as supporting training and running prevention projects. The new joint three-year project, entitled ‘Community for Recovery’, is funded by the Department of Health's Innovation, Excellence and Strategic Development Fund, and will help drug users dependent on volatile substances access equality of treatment and support. A Web-Hub will provide direct access to information, professional advice, counselling and peer support, without stigma, for VS users and those close to them. The Hub will also connect users with local services whose staff have been specifically trained to effectively address VSA, enabling services to support users and their families, and help them along recovery pathways.

Finally, we would like to hear from you if you are working on VS-related issues – we are especially interested in identifying good professional practice with VS users. Please contact Steve Ream at Re-Solv on 01785 817885, or email director@re-solv.org.

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