

# A COCAINE EXPLOSION?

IT IS EASY to put forward arguments to support the contention that cocaine misuse in the UK is bound to increase and, even if 'the cocaine explosion' is an inappropriate description, that this drug will cause more problems than heroin.

The United States authorities have not sought to play down the sheer scale of the cocaine problem in their country, and many people — including the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee — have been greatly concerned to hear of their experiences. In the first half of this decade, despite the commitment of resources on a massive scale, they saw the price of a kilo of cocaine drop by a half (from \$60,000 to \$28,000, and to a temporary \$16,000 a kilo when there was a glut in South Florida in spring 1984), with the drug readily available in all states and widely used throughout different sections of the community. In South America, in spite of some successes on the law enforcement front, attempts to reduce levels of coca production have so far met with limited success. Welcome efforts have been made to control essential chemicals, but this inevitably has side effects, such as the dispersal of cocaine laboratories as far afield as Europe.

Reports from the USA — of oversupply in 1982, market saturation in 1983, and now of an estimated 20 tons of processed cocaine hydrochloride available annually for export to Europe — do tend to support the view that the highly organised and commercially successful traffickers see western Europe as a major market. Positive indications of this within Europe are the increasing numbers of arrests of South American couriers — 'mules' working for others rather than entrepreneurs — and the identification of associates of the Colombian criminal organisations probing for opportunities to establish themselves.

Drug misuse is already pervasive in western Europe: the countries are prosperous enough and have fairly well established drug dealing networks. Close ties with South America are not, of course, confined to Portugal and Spain.

We have been seeing some encouraging signs of a possible levelling off of the heroin problem. We have less reliable information about cocaine, but the general upward trend in numbers of arrests and seizures has continued through 1986. There are some parallels with West Germany, where the gap between heroin and cocaine seizures is also narrowing.

ALL SET THEN for the UK cocaine explosion? I think not. We have the awareness of how the problem can develop (an advantage we did not have at the start

**In January cocaine worth £6 million was seized in Essex and politicians renewed warnings that surplus South American cocaine was set to cause a 'cocaine explosion' in Britain. But the UK's top police drugs investigator believes our defences can withstand the onslaught from across the Atlantic.**

## Colin Hewett

of the heroin escalation). In the UK and abroad there is far less of the philosophy that the problem will stay elsewhere, and politicians are increasingly prepared to act rather than express concern.

Probably not just because of the high cost, the anticipated demand for cocaine has not yet developed in western Europe, despite recent news media advertising of 'crack'. Misuse has not spread to any great extent from the major cities or from those socio-economic groups able to afford the drug. We certainly have not reached the stage when arrests and seizures are likely to have little effect on an established market.

The reasons are many and complex. Clearly the cheapness and versatility of amphetamines, especially attractive to young people, makes them an increasingly acceptable alternative to cocaine and heroin, which are expensive (averaging £80 a gram) and still comparatively difficult to acquire. Equally, tragic deaths from drugs misuse probably do have a deterrent effect and may tend to dispel myths about the recreational use of cocaine and emphasise its dangers.

In practical terms, much that was initiated in response to the heroin problem is only now starting to impact. The Drug Trafficking Offences Act is timely and is a far better investigative tool than many appreciate. Steps are now being taken to implement the provisions in the Act for reciprocal enforcement agreements with other countries, with the ultimate aim of eliminating safe havens for either the traffickers or for their assets. With strengthened resources for both police and Customs, and — by shrewd use of intelligence — better targeting of those resources to get at traffickers at the right level, we should see significantly more than just an increasing number of arrests and seizures.

Close cooperation nationally and internationally has not been entirely achieved in the past, but recent vast improvements bode well for the future. More drug liaison officers are being posted to key areas abroad and we are hosting more here. Just as the National Drugs Intelligence Unit is a development in the UK, so our colleagues in enforcement abroad have strengthened

their national/international organisations — good examples are the *Brigada Central de Estupefacientes* of the Spanish Police and *L'Office Central pour la Repression du Trafic Illicite des Stupefiants* of the French Police.

The 1986 James Smart Lecture was given by Ray Kendall, the Secretary General of Interpol, on "The International aspects of drug-related crime and the consequences for the United Kingdom". He has encouraged his Drugs Sub-Division in so many initiatives. Interpol and the Customs Co-operation Council are working constructively in their different spheres, and together, to harmonise the international enforcement effort.

IT IS OFTEN FORGOTTEN by the pessimists who see the so-called drugs barons as all powerful, that the trail from the coca fields of South America to the cocaine retailers here is a long and difficult one, and the return journey for the profits is equally hazardous. The traffickers have been adept at taking advantage of weaknesses in enforcement systems (the Bahamas are a classic example of this) but now we have the capacity to strike at their weak links, wherever they may be. To take heed of warnings from the USA is far different from accepting it as inevitable that we have to experience a cocaine problem of anything like the scale there. □



**Leaves of *Erythroxylon coca*, a hardy plant indigenous to the Andean highlands and the source of cocaine. The economies of some S. American countries now rely on illicit cocaine production. Top cocaine traffickers recently showed they have the power to kill 'unhelpful' Colombian officials, even behind the 'Iron Curtain'.**

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