

## A hidden threat

Much of the media hype around the rise in legal high deaths mask trends that are far more newsworthy and alarming, says **Mike Power**.

News reports on the latest drug death figures (2011-2012) from the National Programme on Substance Abuse Deaths (np-SAD) managed to simultaneously miss the point, and miss a few great stories.

Legal highs, the press release said, are the top priority in drugs policy today. "The prevalence of these drugs in the post-mortem toxicology tests submitted to the report has increased 800 per cent in three years, from 12 in 2009 to 97 in 2012."

Shocking stuff. But disregarding the poor maths (12 to 97 is a 700 per cent increase) there's also poor logic and poor science at work here, and evidence of a determination to maintain the flourishing moral panic surrounding legal highs or Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS) that was sown by the Labour government in 2010, and tended carefully ever since.

The figure of 97 NPS deaths was quoted far and wide – but closer reading showed that only 68 deaths were found by npSAD to have been specifically caused by the use of these drugs.

Now look more closely: of those 68 deaths, 20 were actually caused by PMA and PMMA, substituted amphetamines. Neither drug can be said to be novel, since they have existed for decades – they were first synthesised in 1967 by psychedelic chemist, Alexander Shulgin. Both are Class A drugs, not 'legal highs'. A further two deaths were attributed to 4-MA – which is just another name for PMA. So, 22 of the 68 legal highs deaths were from PMA or PMMA. That leaves us with 44 NPS deaths.

PMA and PMMA, sold under false pretences as ecstasy tablets, almost

tripled in just a year – from 7 in 2011 to 20 in 2012.

Using the npSAD's own 2009 figure as a year zero, there has been a combined 22-fold increase in deaths from these specific substances in four years; there were none just four years ago. Where was that story?

### The harm reduction messages around safer ecstasy use that were so prevalent 20 years ago are being lost in this moral panic about legal highs

Users of these fake ecstasy pills are unwitting, they are young, and they do not have long-term drug addictions or indulge in risky behaviours such as injection, or even polydrug use. Their deaths are shocking and unexpected.

The harm reduction messages around safer ecstasy use that were so prevalent 20 years ago – with users advised to dose cautiously with new and untrusted batches, to avoid other drugs and alcohol, and to remain moderately hydrated and cool, are being lost in this moral panic about legal highs. Apply them with renewed vigour to PMA and PMMA, and lives would be saved.

Moreover, as a proportion of the 1,613 deaths, NPS as defined by this study accounted for just 4.2 per cent of all drug-related deaths in the UK. Take out the 22 PMA/PMMA deaths and you have 44 fatalities, or less than three per cent of all drug deaths in the UK.

Yet every major media outlet went with the legal highs story. That's not to deny that legal highs remain popular, or that often their use can carry severe health risks. It's also true that from a journalist's perspective, legal highs are a great story – I have written extensively on the subject myself (including in this month's edition of Druglink on the Wedinos project) and will continue to do so: they offer a fascinating data point to anyone interested in the multi-stranded debate around drug use and law.

But the real killers remain heroin and morphine (36.4 per cent of 2012 deaths); and hypnotics/sedatives such as diazepam (30.3 per cent).

Might it not be useful to present this information a little differently each year? A single paper for each drug category would allow journalists to quickly compare figures across the years. A reclassification of PMA into a separate category would allow better monitoring of the prevalence of these pills and their health effects.

There were two other angles reporters did not spot. I didn't see any stories at all on the drug problem within what people rarely refer to as "the white community". No panicked editorials, no representatives of the white community were summoned to explain or justify the fact that 97.3% of the 1,613 deaths recorded by npSAD were of white people. Is this not statistically interesting?

Nor did I see an anguished commentariat pontificating over the fact that those whose drug use killed them were overwhelmingly male, with men making up 72.2% of all fatalities.

But when it comes to drugs, statistics, policy and journalism, there's an awful lot that just doesn't add up.

■ **Mike Power** is a freelance journalist and author of *Drugs 2.0: The web revolution that's changing how the world gets high*