

Beyond opiates ... and into the '90s

*From the terraces to the clubs
with Lifeline's Peanut Pete*

The Lifeline Project in Manchester identified a new group of potential clients among young people attending rave dance venues using a range of drugs including ecstasy, LSD and amphetamine. A cartoon leaflet series was tailor made to attract this group. Experience showed their problems were mainly legal, though later psychological and physical problems emerged. As a group dedicated to lively enjoyment, these young people require a different treatment and educational approach from opiate addicts.

LIFELINE MANCHESTER is sited in shopfront style premises on the street that is the focal point for one of the leading international forces in contemporary youth culture – 'raving', characterised by large numbers of young people dancing till late to loud house music in hot and humid surroundings. It would be wrong to overstate the part that illicit drug use plays in this very popular youth culture – but equally wrong to overlook the fact that large numbers of young people are consuming large amounts of stimulant and hallucinogenic drugs and some are getting into problems. Last year we took a decision to target these young, recreational drug users.

These developments in youth drug use patterns are taking place at a time when drug services are consolidating much of their work within an HIV prevention framework and rightly concentrating their efforts on the 'heavier end' of the market. In our area the type of clients most familiar to drug services are white, unemployed or underemployed men, injecting opiates in a dependent fashion.

Part of the reason why Lifeline decided to target young recreational drug users is precisely because they are being left out as services wrestle with the logistics of accommodating large numbers of opiate dependents.

The task of attracting these 'newer users' fell into four stages. Firstly we had to get a clear idea of who they are – an 'identikit' profile of our target group. This would give us an idea of the key ways they differ from our traditional opiate using clientele, enabling us to review how our service might need to change to attract them.

Secondly, we had to decide how to advertise our service to the target group. Thirdly, we had to develop our service response to their needs as and when they

arose. Fourthly, we had to arrange for ongoing monitoring of our contact with this 'new' group as a discreet piece of 'action-research'.

The 'new user' profiled

We built up the identikit profile by contacting young people who were members of the target group. We were able to do this by speaking at length to some young people we knew as a result of some of our staff's interest in following local football teams. Travel to and from away matches and pre- and post-match drinking haunts provided handy arenas for 'testing the water'.

*"However much money I
had, I would never be as
happy as I am on Friday,
Saturday and Sunday"*

– 18-year-old raver

Over the last couple of years there has been a clearly observable overlap between the nightclubbing and terrace cultures – noted at the last football world cup when England supporters took up the now famous chant of "Let's all have a disco!" The practices of 'skinning up' (smoking cannabis), 'having a dab' (of amphetamine sulphate), 'taking a trip' (LSD), and 'doing an 'E'', are making easy transitions from dance floor to terrace.

For many young men the weekend has become a distinct leisure culture that merges mornings, afternoons and nights into one unbroken hedonistic celebration.

Links between football fans and drug use were cemented in the coffee shops of Amsterdam in May 1991 as thousands of Manchester United fans celebrated their club's victorious return to Europe with copious amounts of cannabis. Given that United fans are drawn from across the UK, glorious tales of the joys of cannabis were spread nationwide. Having

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IT WAS 1969 THE YEAR OF WOODSTOCK, THE FIRST MAN ON THE MOON, UNITED STILL HAD GEORGE BEST ON THE WING AND THERE WAS SOME REAL HEAVY ACID ABOUT...

Time Tripper became Peanut Pete

PARANOIA AND THE DONT CARE BEARS WITH PEANUT PETE



crossed the line to using cannabis, these young people are now more receptive to experimenting with other drugs.

This first stage produced the following identikit profile of our target group:

- aged 15 to 25, predominantly white and male from working class backgrounds;
- followers of local football teams and local bands, and regular clubgoers;
- officially unemployed or underemployed, but familiar with - and occasionally involved in - the workings of local 'irregular economies';
- having grown up with drugs throughout their formative years, they now view drug use as perfectly normal behaviour.

Hitting the target

We had then to decide how to advertise our service to this target group. As a starting point we built on our experience of producing the harm reduction comic for injecting drug users - *Smack in the Eye* - by revising two cartoon strips from past issues.

These were reproduced on a single sheet of brightly coloured A4 paper folded in half; *Time Tripper* is a cartoon strip about the use of hallucinogenic drugs; *Call the Cops* contains advice for those arrested for drugs offences.

We arranged distribution of these flyers through a limited number of outlets, including record shops and a fashion emporium frequented by the young clubgoers. Both were eagerly received by that target group, whose members began to show an interest in Lifeline.

Following this success we produced another single-sheet flyer featuring a specially invented character, 'Peanut Pete'. Whereas *Time Tripper* and *Call the Cops* were drawn from *Smack in the Eye*, Peanut Pete was designed to speak directly to our target

audience.

The first edition of his adventures finds Pete exploring Manchester city centre under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs. Its aim was simply to entertain and tell people what and where Lifeline is. The response was very encouraging. In the three months before the launch of Peanut Pete Lifeline received 23 new referrals where the drug problem concerned either LSD, ecstasy or amphetamine. In the quarter that saw the launch (July to September 1990) new referrals for problems with the same 'recreational' drugs rose to 60.

Legal shock

Having contacted the targets we then had to assess their needs and decide how to address them. We realised that these new users are often in sound physical shape with interesting and active social lives. Their problems arise from the illegality of using their drugs of choice, the psychological effects of 'bingeing' on these drugs, and the social reactions of their families to their drug use. In responding to their requirements, the ability to give quality legal advice fast emerged as of crucial importance. Most of the first wave of new clients at Lifeline were primarily motivated to seek help of a legal nature.

Most opiate users ask us for legal advice because they have been arrested for an acquisitive crime and are citing their drug dependence in mitigation. In contrast, the first members of the target group to approach us had been arrested for serious Misuse of Drugs Act offences involving possession with intent to supply.

They knew quite a lot about the pharmacology of their drugs of choice, what effects to expect, and how to maximise the potential for a positive experience, but we soon

Mitigation backlash hits user-dealers

Young ecstasy, LSD and amphetamine users may be suffering the legal repercussions of courtroom mitigation tactics. We are getting very good at presenting our opiate using clients to the courts as 'innocent victims', but it follows that someone else must be the 'evil villain'. Those charged with supplying any illicit drugs fit the bill only too well. Members of our target group sell drugs (to consenting others) to finance their own use, and for this are slammed by the courts. Many opiate users are charged with acquisitive crimes like burglary, but by playing the innocent victim are often dealt with relatively leniently. Drug user-dealing may be seen as a 'victimless crime', but by no stretch of the imagination can this be extended to burglary.

realised that they were ignorant in one crucial area - the law on the misuse of drugs.

Commonly, members of our target group purchase a relatively small number of LSD 'trips' or ecstasy tablets (10, 20, or 30) for a discounted wholesale price. Over a weekend these will be sold at a small profit to acquaintances who move in the same social circles. A 'successful' weekend will see the initial investment recouped and the remaining drugs retained for use by the individual and his or her very close friends.

In this setting the vendor is seen as providing an essential service to their social group and enjoys an enhanced standing among them. But the law's attitude is very different: found in possession of over 10 LSD 'trips' or 'Es', a possession with intent to supply charge is a real possibility.

When you have been brought up to regard drug use as non-deviant behaviour, it comes as a great shock to be charged with possessing class A drugs with intent to supply - a charge which carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. It was at this stage that we began to ponder some of the wider issues (see panel above).

Peer group service

Despite the courts' attitudes to them, for members of our target group selling drugs is not primarily a commercial venture. These individuals bear no resemblance either to the stereotype of the 'proselytising junky' or the 'evil drug baron'. They are ordinary young people who subsidise their social life by providing a service in demand by others in their social group. Neither are they the downtrodden resorting to drug-induced oblivion. These youngsters are dedicated consumers too busy enjoying the world as it is - at least on weekends - to engage in ritual