

## Readers reply

A big thank you to all our readers who returned the 1996 *Druglink* questionnaire earlier this year. More people than ever replied, giving us the best picture to date of what the *Druglink* reader actually looks like.

No surprises in finding that the average reader still works mainly or exclusively in the drug field. However subscribers who have drug misuse as just one part of their responsibility have increased by over a third. This means that *Druglink* is now reaching out to a more diverse readership than ever.

*Druglink* doesn't just sit on your desk either. You told us that on average six or seven other readers would get their hands on your copy of the magazine. This means that around 15,000 people get to read *Druglink* every year.

There were few surprises for the editorial team. Although 12 per cent of readers felt that *Druglink*'s editorial line was biased towards harm reduction, the majority – nearly two-thirds – felt that our editorial line was balanced. But whatever you felt, only four in one hundred didn't like it.

This year we asked what areas concerned you in the drug field. What we found is that your main (and most topical) worry is the impact of alcoholic 'soft' drinks on young people. Two other issues that were raised are the funding of services and the criminal justice system. Rest assured, we will be covering these areas over the next year.

What does come through loud and clear is that *Druglink* needs a revamp – our design (though 'clear' and 'solid') needs to be updated for the next century, and this is definitely something we seek to do in the near future. So watch this space.

Also, you want more of it! Overwhelmingly, you voted for *Druglink* to be a monthly magazine. This is something we are exploring, but all these things take time and money.

So once again, thank you all for taking part in our biennial exercise in 'user-involvement'. Our analysis of the returns is still on-going, but we hope that you'll soon notice the changes.

# Bullets, misused substances or just an unfortunate household accident?

In October, the Health Education Authority (HEA) followed up its national drug campaign with a fresh one on solvent misuse. The adverts clearly place solvents in the same league as heroin – as a substance people deliberately misuse. This definition may seem to be a common-sense one, but the solvent misuse field is far from united on it.

As with the earlier drug campaign, the solvent adverts feature in consumer and women's magazines, such as *Take a Break* and *Good Housekeeping*. As with the earlier campaign, they were also pre-tested on focus groups before the go-ahead was given. However, unlike the earlier campaign, the solvent publicity has been greeted with a great deal of support from the substance misuse field. Richard Ives, one of Britain's leading solvent misuse experts, told *Druglink*, "It's great they're doing the campaign. I'm glad they're keeping up the momentum."

This response is in stark contrast to the reaction to the drug campaign, the imagery of which was seen by some drug workers as "a waste of money".<sup>1</sup> This time round – instead of anatomical cross-sections of young people – the main advert shows a syringe mutating into an aerosol can, with the rhetorical strapline: "What killed more teenagers than heroin in the UK last year?"

The only potential problem with the images used is one identified by the HEA itself: another advert portrays aerosols as a handful of bullets, an association which may not be particularly welcome in the current post-Dunblane environment. A source at the Department of Health (DoH) told *Druglink* that, "the word 'teenager' was deliberately used to establish clear water between the tragedy at Dunblane and the typical age at which young people are killed by solvent misuse."

### Targeting parents

As with previous solvent campaigns, the adverts are directed at adults, especially those with teenage children. This form of 'adult education' is clearly seen as effective by the HEA when it comes to solvents, as the 1992 and 1994 campaigns have been credited with, at least in part, reducing teenage solvent-related deaths.

However, in 1994 (the year for

1. HEA campaign: out of their heads? *Druglink*: 1996, 11(3), p.6.  
2. Solvent field comes unstuck as charity changes tack. *Druglink*: 1995, 10(6), p.4.  
3. ACMD. *Volatile Substance Abuse*. HMSO, 1995.

The HEA adverts: 'solvent abuse can kill instantly'

which the latest figures are available) deaths of under-18 year olds accounted for under half of all deaths for the very first time. Going by recent mortality statistics alone, the people who should be targeted are actually those in their late-twenties, as deaths in this age group are now two and a half times their average since 1971. As Richard Ives says, "it's a great campaign, but it's a bit late".

### Solvents as drugs

Despite such qualified support, the reaction to the campaign is still not unanimously positive. At the time of writing, Re-Solv, the national solvent misuse charity, had no position on the effectiveness or otherwise of the HEA's campaign.

A handful of bullets may not be welcome in the post-Dunblane environment

This unwillingness to become involved has been ascribed in part to the organisation's new philosophy, as outlined in *Druglink* last year.<sup>2</sup> This new outlook was presented to the solvent field at a conference entitled *Volatile Substance Abuse – a new perspective*. The 'big idea' was that solvent misuse is more similar to a household accident than a deliberate act of intoxication and should be addressed more through product safety rather than through drug education. Essentially, this was an attempt to sever the link between solvents and drugs.

This re-positioning of Britain's only national solvent misuse organisation has affected its position in the solvent misuse field, alienating it from other bodies. By its own admission, Re-Solv was sidestepped by the HEA in the run-up to the campaign and as there are very few projects nationally which are specifically funded to tackle solvent misuse, there is plenty of room for solvent misuse workers to begin setting up their own organisations in an attempt to redress the balance. According to Keith Owen, secretary of the informal Network VSA which was formed for this very reason, Re-Solv is currently "operating in a vacuum", both in terms of the rigour of its argument and the lack of any 'rival' national organisations.

These philosophical manoeuvrings have also frustrated civil servants and government ministers, as it goes against the line adopted by *Tackling Drugs Together*. *Druglink* was simply told that they have 'agreed to disagree', although it should also be pointed out that Re-Solv's new thinking is not set in stone.

However, as it currently stands, it also ignores one of the main tenets of the report on *Volatile Substance Abuse* prepared last year by a working group of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs.<sup>3</sup> This report had a clear slant towards preventative education and although it advised that an industry-wide forum be set up to examine product safety, the chair of the working group, Professor Griffith Edwards, cautioned against shifting the onus solely onto solvent producers – "the last thing to do is to make an enemy of industry". The government's response to the report is expected shortly.