

# Butane industry holds its breath

**A report from the Laboratory of the Government Chemist, now with the Department of Trade and Industry, could cause a major upset in the multi-million pound butane lighter fuel industry.**

The report examines the possibility of including an additive in lighter fuel to reduce levels of abuse. This issue was considered by the ACMD in its 1995 report on solvents, and although it did not make a specific recommendation over additives, it did suggest that:

"substances might be added to give it a nasty taste - we understand that manufacturers concentrate on taste rather than smell since a product with an unpleasant smell is likely to put off legitimate users."

One major butane lighter fuel manufacturer, Ronson, is already working with Shell to produce such an additive, called Bitrex, which is supposed to cause vomiting should anybody inhale gas containing it.

## Blockage in the system?

However, one of Ronson's major competitors, Keene World Marketing, claims that the additive idea is - quite literally - a non-starter.

"It will block up the lighters and no lighter company will agree to that," managing director Geoffrey Keene, a leading light in the industry forum set up by the DTI, told *Druglink*. "In fact, Rizla who are the main importers of refillable lighters into this country, have openly said that they would advise all their customers not to use this product if anybody puts it into lighter gas."

John Graham, Ronson's operations director, denies there would be any problem with the proper functioning of lighters. "We've done a lot of tests and the percentage of additive in the product will not make any difference at all."

## Labelling misusers

Two more specific ACMD recommendations have also failed to win whole-hearted industry support. The first was to devise a product label to warn of the dangers of solvent misuse.

This has been taken on board by the British Aerosol Manufacturers Association (which does not cover the cigarette lighter fuel industry), but the current labelling strategy has been dismissed by Keene as "a waste of time. Putting a label on aerosol products simply highlights that they can be abused, when in fact they are abused relatively rarely compared

with butane." He favours much tougher wording designed with butane abuse in mind.

The second and most specific ACMD recommendation which is also now under investigation by the DTI, is to encourage the sale of butane fuel in units no larger than 25ml. At the moment, the standard size is 250ml, costing just over £1, which will last a legitimate user nearly two years. A butane inhaler, on the other hand, will get through one in half an hour, and would have to buy ten 25ml cans at 80p a shot to achieve the same high.

Not only would this cost far more than the 250ml can, but it would be easier for an honest retailer to spot abusers and refuse sales, while also strengthening the currently ineffective legislation. Already Sainsbury and ASDA have swept the 250ml cans from their shelves.



Is nauseous butane or smaller canisters the route to fewer solvent deaths?

However, John Graham whose company actually produces an 18ml can, says it is precisely because the 25ml cans are relatively more expensive, and so not perceived as good value by customers, that take-up from retailers has been slow.

## Supply and demand . . .

But in the industry war of words over butane sales, Geoffrey Keene goes a step further by suggesting that through sheer ignorance of the problems of solvent misuse, some of his commercial rivals are 'cashing in' on butane abuse by supplying the larger cans at cut price in some parts of the UK: "If you are a solvent abuser, you don't care what brand you buy, you just want the cheapest product you can find."

Keene alleges that some of the cheapest brands are mainly on sale (and bought) in Scotland and the north of England where - adjusting for population density - solvent death rates are highest. "This has got to be more than a coincidence," he told *Druglink*, although he feels sure that his competitors "would be horrified if they knew what was going on."



## Political straightjackets

The insurmountable problem is that even if there could ever be a voluntary agreement among UK manufacturers to stop producing the larger size of lighter can, this would fall foul of EC competition regulations.

This is because, to be effective, a voluntary industry ban would ultimately necessitate an official ban of foreign 250ml cans from the UK market. Such unilateral UK government action would cause howls of protest from abroad, but the Treaty of Rome theoretically allows it. Again, in the absence of any industry consensus, the government could also legislate in favour of Bitrex.

But it is difficult to find a government department willing, or able, to carry the can for any such action. The DTI would seem the most obvious contender as it has industry links and holds the product safety remit. However, it cannot act against a commercial product unless the product turns out to be dangerous in ordinary use.

The greatest obstacle, though, is that representations to the EU on limiting can size are unlikely to be met with much enthusiasm unless the Community as a whole recognises solvent misuse as a Europe-wide problem. At the moment, it does not.

Meanwhile, those with a massive financial investment in the UK butane lighter fuel industry wait with baited breath as the DTI considers whether nauseous butane or smaller canisters is the route to fewer solvent deaths in the United Kingdom ■