

Coke in the UK

Could it be the real thing?

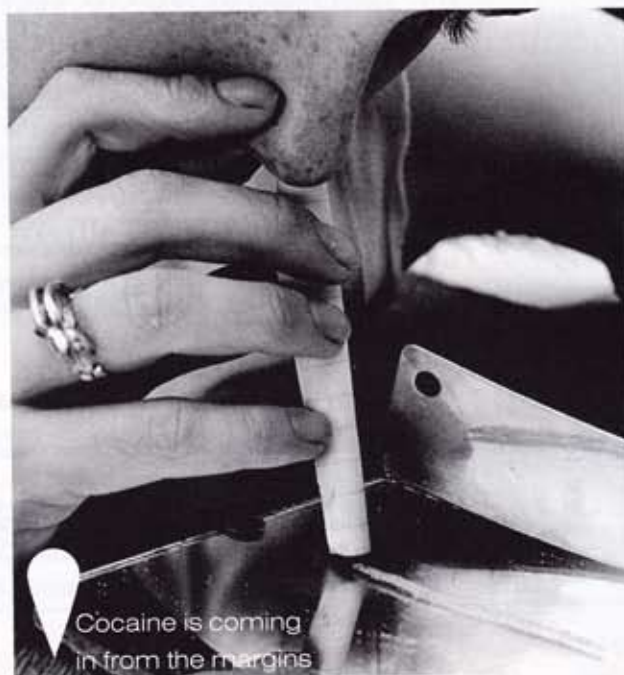
The latest figures from the British Crime Survey (BCS) reveal a 'significant' increase in all the indicators for cocaine use in the UK. Of those drugs the BCS defines as 'highly addictive', cocaine is the most widely used with six per cent of 16-29 year olds saying they have tried it at some time while for heroin and crack the figure is only one per cent. The authors speculate that the higher rates for cocaine, 'may be because it is less socially stigmatised than other drugs in this group'.

The view that cocaine is coming in from the margins was borne out by research conducted by the National Addiction Centre (NAC) and published in *Druglink* earlier this year.¹ The authors went out in search of the young heroin users highlighted in a previous Home Office Report², but instead found young cocaine users.

Why should this be happening? Clearly price is a factor. Cocaine still has its champagne image, but in the London area a gram of cocaine can be bought for as little as £40. Four people contributing only £10 each (the price of four pints of lager in London) could all experience an evening's worth of cocaine intoxication.

It was in London that the last BCS showed the biggest percentage fall in the use of ecstasy. The NAC research suggests that rather than giving up drugs because of the bad publicity surrounding ecstasy, some young drug users have simply switched to another more powerful stimulant drug.

As the BCS authors say, 'the spread of cocaine across the



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country remains uneven'. Given the pledge of the government to reduce cocaine use among under 25s, to see every indicator on the increase will make uncomfortable reading.

More bad news for the government comes from the Office of National Statistics (ONS). A report on the drug use of 5000 11-15 year olds in England revealed that one third of 15 year olds had used drugs. Also, seven per cent of all those who had ever used did so in the last month, while over half of those who had ever used drugs had only tried cannabis.

Those aged 14-15 years seem to experience the biggest jump in drug experimentation. ONS figures contrast the one per cent of 11 year old triers with 33 per cent aged 15.

Analysis of John Balding's long-running schools health unit survey shows that, over the years of his survey, experimentation hardly increases to the age of 14,

but then the numbers experimenting jump significantly. This trend has held true since the school surveys started looking at drugs, in the late '80s.

A similar picture emerges with smoking. The ONS survey shows there were very few smokers at the beginning of secondary school, but by the age of 15, around 25 per cent of the ONS survey were regular smokers. Only three in ten had not tried a cigarette. Smoking was also strongly correlated with drug use and drinking. Overall 75 per cent of regular smokers, who also drank at least once a week, had tried drugs.

The message on the impact of health education seems no more encouraging. The survey revealed that more pupils remembered receiving lessons on smoking than any other health topic, but there was 'little evidence that, on the whole, those who remember receiving health education on particular topics are taking the advice given' ■

New drug controlled

The Council of the European Union has recommended that a new synthetic drug, 4-MTA (4-methylthioamphetamine), should be a controlled drug.

This is a result of the work of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) and Europol across Europe, and the Member States' Reitox Focal Points and National Criminal Intelligence Services (NCIS). The decision of the Council came only six months after first notification of the drug.

The EMCDDA's report on 4-MTA recommended that it be controlled due to the high likelihood of overdose - 4-MTA has a slow onset, which is often misinterpreted by users as a weak dose, so they take more.

The drug has long-lasting effects and there are serious problems when mixed with alcohol, MDMA, amphetamines, ephedrine, and certain foods.

Before the summer the EMCDDA issued a warning on 4-MTA, reacting to unfounded media reports that it was '33 times stronger than normal ecstasy'. The agency was concerned that this coverage would increase demand for 4-MTA and lead users to expect relatively fast and dramatic effects.

EU states have three months to introduce controls and criminal penalties for 4-MTA.

More on the way

The National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) has pointed out the likelihood of further developments in synthetic drugs. New drug variants are developed to circumvent legislation or to enhance specific effects, as in the ecstasy group which has drugs with more hallucinogenic, amphetamine-like, or empathic effects.

NCIS conjecture is that chemical and pharmaceutical factories in the former Soviet Union may be used to produce illicit drugs in large quantities in the future.

1. Boys, A. et al. Reading between the lines. *Druglink*: 1999, 14 (1), p.20-23.
2. Parker, H. et al. New heroin outbreaks among young people in England and Wales. Home Office, 1998.