

DEATH BY NUMBERS

Is the UK really one of the major drug death capitals of the world? Well, probably in Europe. **John Corkery** picks apart the statistics.

Readers across the UK opening their papers at the end of June may well have been surprised to learn that apparently, as a headline in the Metro put it, 'Number of drug deaths in Britain among highest in the world'. This headline, amongst others, referred to statistics just published by the UNODC's *World Drug Report 2011*, which had the UK at number six in the global 'league table'.

Based on the UNODC figures, the UK does, with 2,2278 deaths in 2008, appear high up on the league table, behind the USA (38,396), Ukraine (7,597), Russia (7,464), Iran (4,800) and Mexico (4,562). However, when these are related to population size, the UK drops much further down the list. Britain has 55.9 drug-related deaths per million, meaning it drops to 19th in the 'league table' behind not only the five countries already mentioned, but also Kazakhstan, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Sweden, Norway, Canada, and the Seychelles.

But what sort of deaths do these statistics cover? Although the UN does point out that definitions of deaths do vary from country to country, it is impossible to make proper comparisons between countries when they are reporting figures taken from different sources and using often unique definitions. As there are many aspects that have to be taken into consideration and understood. In the UK, for instance, this definition has changed over the years, from *deaths related to drug poisoning, involving both legal and illegal drugs* to the present, and narrower, *definition of fatal overdoses or poisoning involving controlled drugs*.

France, with a similar size population to UK, reported only 287 deaths (for 2007). Does this mean that France has a smaller problem than the UK? Not at

all. The French figures come from police records, which report a far more narrow range of deaths than the method used in the UK – of using death certificates.

It is only when common definitions and methodologies are used (and there are many obstacles to overcome in this respect as well), that it is possible to make more appropriate comparisons. The European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) has undertaken a lot of research in this field over the last decade and more. Using their definition, it is possible to see where the UK really lies in the European 'league table' – at the top – although even then, they feel it necessary to state that "absolute numbers from different countries are not directly comparable since differences remain in quality of recording methods".

So, does the UK have a bigger problem of drug-related deaths than its European counterparts? A truly definitive answer is not possible. However, the UK General Mortality Registers and the Special Mortality Register (np-SAD) have developed robust methods for case ascertainment over the past 14 or 15 years. It is certainly the case that in the UK overall numbers of deaths having increased greatly over time, irrespective of definition. Heroin, methadone, stimulants, as well as benzodiazepines, remain the main causes of UK drug-related fatalities – usually in combination with alcohol and/or other drugs.

■ **John Corkery** is Research Lead, School of Pharmacy, University of Hertfordshire; Programme Manager of the National Programme on Substance Abuse Deaths, International Centre for Drugs Policy, St George's, University of London; and UK Focal Point expert on drug-related death statistics since 2000.

DRUGS QUOTE

The cut of cannabis which teenagers are smoking now across the UK is actually 50 times more potent than it was actually a year ago

Tory MP Nadine Dorries plays fast and loose with the facts on Radio 4's *Any Questions*

Taking skunk cannabis is like holding a revolver to your head and playing Russian Roulette

Tory MP Charlie Walker, during a debate in Parliament

He has a lot to offer the scientific community and may well be able to use his scientific ability to benefit other people

Drug dealer Edward Holland escaped a prison sentence after a crown court judge decided his work as a research scientist could benefit society

The man is not dead. Don't call him a ghost. The days that lie ahead are filled with despair, but I have courage and grace and I'm hopeful, and that is sufficient to carry me through

Grammy Award-winning reggae star Buju Banton after being jailed for 10 years in Florida for trafficking 5kg of cocaine