

Diazepam daze

Drug enforcement officers in Scotland are starting to seize large quantities of tranquillisers they believe are being either manufactured in illegal UK-based laboratories, smuggled from abroad or bought online. **By Jason Bennetto.**

What do a hair salon, an industrial unit, and a white van on a Scottish country road have in common? The surprising answer is huge quantities of the Class C tranquilliser, diazepam.

In March, police officers raided an industrial unit and six homes in the historic town of Paisley, about ten miles west of Glasgow. They found 30,000 diazepam tablets, cash, cocaine and suspected drug-making equipment.

Two months later and the police and the Scottish Crime and Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) were back in Paisley to carry out a late night raid at a hairdressers'. Officers reported finding six kilos of diazepam – tens of thousands of tablets – during the operation.

In June in the Scottish Borders just north of Selkirk, a white Transit van was stopped on the A7. The police seized 1,000 blue diazepam tablets from the vehicle.

The growing popularity of diazepam in Scotland is reflected in the rise in seizures by the police from 571 in 2000/01, to 2,139 in 2006/07, and 3,605 last year. In the year ending April 2011 the eight Scottish police forces recovered 678,100 diazepam tablets. Diazepam – best known under the now defunct brand Valium – makes up 85 per cent of the benzodiazepines recovered in Scotland.

The demand for diazepam is being fuelled by heroin users who, fed up with the poor quality and scarcity of their drug of choice, are switching to tranquillisers, according to Scottish based drug agencies and the DEA. Since the end of 2010, there has been a heroin “drought” that has affected

the availability and strength of the drug. There is also growing evidence that recreational drug users and heavy drinkers too are using diazepam in increasing numbers, unaware of its potentially dangerous side effects and the risk of addiction.

Kenny Simpson, a drugs expert for the Scottish DEA and a former police drugs squad officer, is unequivocal about the scale of the diazepam problem in Scotland. “It’s huge,” he said.

The DEA believe that organised crime in the UK is becoming involved in the production of diazepam. Simpson explained: “one of the real challenges is the changing face of drug dealing. We are finding 1000 to 5000 tablets in a single bag – it is being mass-produced and I think part of this is taking place in the UK.

“Intelligence suggests there are a number of amateur laboratories now operating across Scotland, creating their own illegal versions of the drug.”

Simpson also revealed that there were significant imports from laboratories in India and Pakistan who produce generic and counterfeit diazepam that had branded stamps on the tablets – such as STADA, MSJ, Roche, Tensium and D10 logos – and sealed in blister packs. This in contrast to the poorly produced crumbly pills, suspected to come from UK labs.

Garth Balmer, the Dundee project manager for Addaction, confirmed this trend. He said: “Benzos are like our crack in Scotland. There has been high benzo use in Scotland for a long time, but the big change is where the drug is coming from. In the past it was diverted

prescriptions – from grannies etc – but we are now seeing bulk diazepam from overseas.”

The popularity of diazepam is further demonstrated by the fact that in 2010/11 it was the second most commonly reported drug used (34 per cent or 2,707 people) after heroin (62 per cent) of those individuals attending specialist treatment services in Scotland.

Diazepam acts as a sedative to relieve severe anxiety, which can put the drug user into a stupor. Large quantities can produce a feeling of euphoria.

The main demand is for the high strength 10mg tablets, although there is a market for 2mg white and 5mg yellow tablets. The popular 10mg tablets sell from 50p to £1 each, but can be considerably cheaper if bought in bulk.

Heavy users often take from 5 to 10 tablets at a time, with some taking from 20 to 50 a day, up to about 100 a week – far exceeding the maximum ‘prescribed’ dose of between 2-10mg (2-4 times daily).

When sold on the street the tablet’s nicknames include blues, benzos, vallis, diazies, wobbles, Roches, Manos, and charge sheets. The “charge sheet” reference has been adopted because some heavy users go on crime sprees as the drug can result in them losing control and their memory. Users start to think they are “invisible”, explained one drug worker.

A more recent illicit source of the drug is online sales. Some tablets are bought direct from overseas drug firms, while several online sites have sprung up in which diazepam and other benzos are offered for sale in the UK. On one of the best known diazepam forums in

which people sell drugs, there are more than 70,000 messages. In one post, 1,000 diazepam were on sale for £250.

Of course, there is no way of knowing what is in the drugs or whether they are genuine. The unknown strength of many of the tablets, and the mixing of diazepam with heroin, other benzos and alcohol, are part of the reason that drug agencies are especially concerned about the health implications of widespread diazepam misuse.

John Arthur, director of Crew 2000, a national drugs charity based in Scotland, said that his organisation had identified “rebound anxiety and mental health implications with diazepam use”. He continued, “In some recent cases with street Valium, there seemed to be various reports of suicidal thoughts and low mood after use.”

“There are concerns that people using Valium to come down off stimulants mean that sometimes, they are just putting off the inevitable. They may start using more and more to offset the anxiety and depression which sometimes follows stimulant use and this can lead to a dependency before they know it.”

Gareth Balmer, from Addaction, added: “Diazepam is a very difficult drug to treat. It is behind many drug-related deaths. In fact, I believe it’s been involved in every single death we’ve seen [at the Dundee service] in 2012.”

National figures for Scotland on drug deaths in 2012 are not yet available, but the National Records of Scotland’s Drug Related Deaths in Scotland 2010 reported that of the 485 drug related deaths, diazepam was implicated or potentially contributed to a quarter (122 deaths). Heroin and/or morphine were implicated in, or potentially contributed to, about half (254 deaths). Methadone was linked to just over a third (174 deaths). More than one drug is often responsible for a death.

Diazepam was the most commonly reported drug found in victims of drug-related death, with more than three quarters of cases (77.5%) followed by heroin/morphine (63.7%) and methadone (44.9%). It should be noted that these reports do not state whether the substance caused the death or not.

But it is not just those with serious drug problems that are turning to diazepam. Gareth Balmer noted: “We are beginning to see people who are going out for a few drinks and are starting to dabble with benzos.” He added that he was concerned that with the struggling economy and rising unemployment more people could turn to benzos to

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cope with stress.

Mike Linnell, spokesman for the drugs agency Lifeline, which carried out research about diazepam users in Redcar and Cleveland in July 2010, confirmed that this problem was not confined to Scotland.

He said that his organisation has noticed a “worrying trend” of more recreational drug takers – typically cannabis users – starting to take diazepam. Linnell said that the UK-wide popularity of tranquillisers, most commonly diazepam, which was identified in the *Druglink* 2008 and 2011 Street Drug Trends Survey, continues. The survey found that 16 out of 20 town and cities across the UK reported rapidly rising levels of tranquilliser use in 2010.

Linnell commented: “My impression is that since the heroin shortage there’s been a huge and growing problem with benzo use throughout the country.”

You have only to tap into one of the online benzo forums to gauge the drug’s enduring appeal – and threat. As one user recently wrote: “I have plenty of experience with benzodiazepines after being on and off them for over 8 years or so, and sometimes very high dosages where I have had blackouts for like 2

Legal note:

All the benzodiazepines including diazepam are Class C drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act. However you can be in lawful possession of the drug so long as it has been prescribed by a doctor. But according to the Home Office, if you were caught in possession of diazepam that had not been prescribed for you, then you could be charged under the Act. This would include pharmaceutically produced drugs that had been stolen, bought online or illicitly produced.

weeks at a time.....I’m amazed I’m still alive.”

■ **Jason Bennetto** is a freelance journalist and senior lecturer on the journalism MA course at City University London.

Flashback

Problems with benzodiazepines in Scotland are nothing new. While heroin use soared in England in the mid 1980s, the drug was relatively scarce and of poor quality north of the border. Quality and availability improved into the early 1990s, but by then a culture of injecting Temazepam (and also Temgesic, or buprenorphine) had grown up. Temazepam was produced as a liquid inside a capsule making it easy to inject. When the manufacturers were made aware of what was happening, they changed the formulation from liquid to gel. This did nothing for the situation except make injecting more hazardous; users would simply liquefy the gel for injection only for it to resolidify in the vein, causing many users to lose limbs. Temazepam use was also implicated in incidents of violence and a steep rise in the number of drug deaths in Glasgow in the early 1990s. The capsules were often green in colour, called eggs or jellies on the street and sold for about £1 each. Most were dealt by gangs who stole the drug in wholesale amounts, but there were also numerous anecdotes about the elderly selling part of their prescription to supplement their pension. Some users were reportedly swallowing anywhere between 60-100 tablets a day.

In 1992, the ACMD recommended that Temazepam became a Class C drug, but it took nearly three years for the government to announce the change along with the banning of the gel-filled variety which was still being prescribed. In 1995, BBC’s *Panorama* filmed a documentary in Paisley as an area ravaged by the health and crime consequences of non-medical benzodiazepine use. More than fifteen years on, nothing much seems to have changed apart from the colours.

■ **Harry Shapiro**