

Ecstasy deaths increase five-fold

Ecstasy deaths have increased five-fold since the nineties according to the latest drug-deaths reports. The report from St. George's Medical School will show ecstasy deaths in England and Wales have doubled in one year, from 20 in 2000 to at least 46 in 2001 (rising to 57 if adjusted for late reporting). The average annual death rate up until 1998 was ten.

Deaths in Scotland have also increased. The Scottish Executive report shows that deaths rose from 11 in 2000 to 19 in 2001, again doubling on the previous year.

The new figures show that more deaths were reported in the last two years than for the whole of the 1990s.

Evidence suggests the rise in reported deaths is partly due to an increase in the availability of the drug, coupled with a drop in price and a change in using patterns.

Since 1998, the number of ecstasy seizures has almost doubled rising from 49,000 to 97,000 in 2000.

The increase in availability has led to a drop in price, from an average of £10 a pill to £4 and, therefore, to an increase in use. The latest British Crime Survey



(BCS) also shows an increase in the number of twenty-somethings taking the drug.

Cocaine and heroin deaths are rising too. Scotland in particular saw a large increase in the number of cocaine-related deaths, up from

4 in 2000 to 20 in 2001 while heroin rose from 196 in 2000 to 216 in 2001.

Data made available to *Druglink* shows the majority of fatalities are in their mid to late twenties with traces of one or more drug. Ecstasy was the only drug implicated in seven deaths, with cocaine and ecstasy implicated in five and other drugs like cannabis, opiates and alcohol implicated in the remaining deaths.

Evidence suggests people are taking more pills than previously. *MixMag* for example found its readers take on average four ecstasy pills on a night out, with some taking as many as 12.

Club promoter Tam Saunders has noticed an increase in ecstasy use among party-goers. He told *Druglink*; 'Whereas in the nineties, people would take maybe two pills a night, people turn up with a bag full, taking up to six or seven in a night.'

Death statistics are notoriously difficult to interpret. As John Corkery of the Home Office and advisor to the government on drug-deaths points out, 'a drug-related death says nothing about how that person died or whether the reported drug had a contributory effect. What we need to know

are the mechanics of the death.'

To complicate matters, drug-related deaths are not consistently reported by coroners, and details of the deaths can often be lacking.

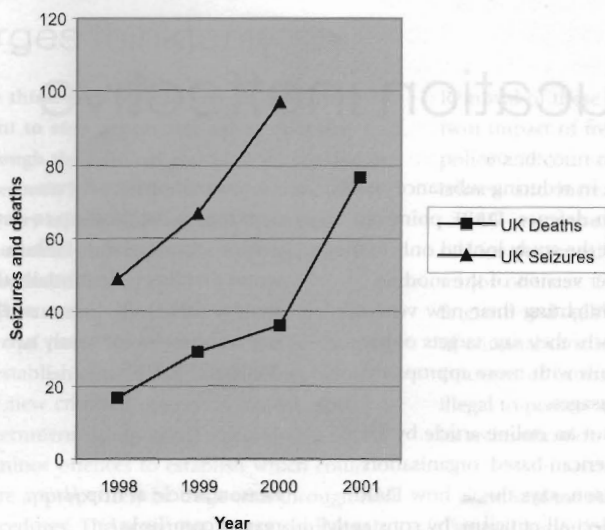
Mike Pollard of St George's Medical School who publishes the annual reports for England and Wales and helps run the National Programme on Substance Abuse Deaths (np-SAD) admit this is a problem. He warns that the figures need to be interpreted with care.

'There was a 20% increase in overall reporting from coroners for 2001. On top of this, increased reporting of ecstasy deaths may be a consequence of better reporting and increased awareness of ecstasy deaths. This can also be seen with other drugs such as cocaine and heroin.'

More research is needed to establish causes of deaths, but as Mike Pollard warns, 'this research is badly under resourced and funding is sporadic. We need better information if we are to understand the causes of drug-related deaths.'

The St George's report is due out the end of September 2002. For copies of the report phone 020 8275 5522.

Ecstasy - Seizures and Deaths



Prison is not the answer - says public

The public believe prison is not effective at reducing crime, according to the first briefing paper in the *Rethinking Crime and Punishment* project.

A review of recent research into the public's attitudes of prison shows that most believe people come out of prison worse than they go in. It also concludes that better parenting, more police on the beat, better discipline in schools and constructive activities for young people are preferred

options for reducing crime.

Rethinking Crime and Punishment is a three-year strategic grant-making initiative funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation. It aims to raise the level of public debate about the use of prison and alternative forms of punishment.

For copies of the report summary *What does the public think about prison* e-mail: info@rethink.org.uk