

Every day and every way....

Max Daly investigates the growing market in drugs that claim to put you on top of the game.

When hairdresser Claire Squires emptied a scoop of the now banned sports energy supplement *Jack3d* into her water bottle before running last year's London Marathon, she had no idea she was putting her life on the line.

"If I hit a bit of a wall, I might take this drink and see if it pushes me through the end," she told her boyfriend Simon Van Herrewege before the race. When Claire had bought it over the internet, the blurb had informed her that *Jack3d* "kick ass" and was "backed by multiple University studies, including double-blind, placebo-controlled research".

But a mile from the finish line Claire, a 30-year-old fitness enthusiast who was raising money for the Samaritans, collapsed and died of a heart attack. In January, a coroner ruled that DMAA, a stimulant contained in *Jack3d*, was a key factor in her death, as it had been in other deaths around the world.

The market in drugs used to enhance the human mind and body is a burgeoning one selling a plethora of substances to cater for our every need. From the internet, the local gym or under the counter at your local health shop, you can buy anabolic steroids to build a six-pack and human growth hormones to get toned and trim. There are powders to make you thinner and solutions to make your skin lighter...or darker. There are supplements to enable you to run all day, to have sex for hours, and 'smart' drugs to give you unnatural powers of concentration.

The industry in human enhancement drugs is, unlike the trade in psychoactive drugs, all about functionality. These substances do not promise to free the mind and enable the user to lose control.

They claim to enable people to take control over their body and mind, to achieve a means to an end, to be better than 'normal'.

In a society where it is possible to buy powerful Red Bull caffeine shots in your local newsagent and have a super quick boob job in your lunch hour, manufacturers and retailers are tapping into a growing desire by people to optimize their minds and bodies.

"It's empowering. While they have less and less control of the social issues around them, people are finding they can have control over their own body," says Jim McVeigh, deputy director of the Centre for Public Health at John Moore's University and co-author of its 2012 report into the phenomenon of enhancement drugs.

"People are under a lot of pressure from the society to look a certain way. And largely because of the internet, there is increasingly the ways and means of getting hold of a range of potions to try and do this."

Compared to the trade in illegal drugs, the enhancement drug industry attracts nothing like the same stigma. It exists in a legal grey area that provides it with an air of respectability and scientific legitimacy. Most products are officially legal to use or possess, but more often than not they are bought from an illicit, unregulated market that can make them as unreliable and dangerous as their illegal counterparts.

As with the rapid expansion of the industry in the new wave of

psychoactive drugs such as mephedrone, the enhancement drug trade has hitched a ride on the coat tails of the internet and globalization to provide a wide variety of cheap, easily available substances. The raw ingredients to make anything from anabolic steroids to Viagra counterfeits are sourced from a vast array of unregulated and underground chemical laboratories around the world.

While some are legitimate brands stolen and diverted onto the illicit market, the vast majority, as with new psychoactive substances, are unregulated products made on the cheap in chemical laboratories in China, South-East Asia, India, Pakistan and Eastern Europe and marketed over the internet.



Some products may be counterfeits sold as legitimate products such as Viagra, others may be marketed as versions of underground brands that have a good reputation within the trade.

Taking these drugs is as much of a lucky dip exercise as buying one of the new psychoactive drugs online. Despite what they may say on the tin, these products often contain banned and harmful substances or experimental and adulterated drugs that can cause allergic reactions, liver damage, mercury poisoning, brain damage and even death.

Although the enhancement drugs business is mired in criminality, to a large extent it escapes the glare of the media. For politicians and the police, the issue of enhancement drugs sits way down on the list of priorities compared to tackling the market in illegal drugs. Despite the widespread dealing of steroids in gyms across the country, there are, for example, only a handful of convictions for steroid supply each year in the UK.

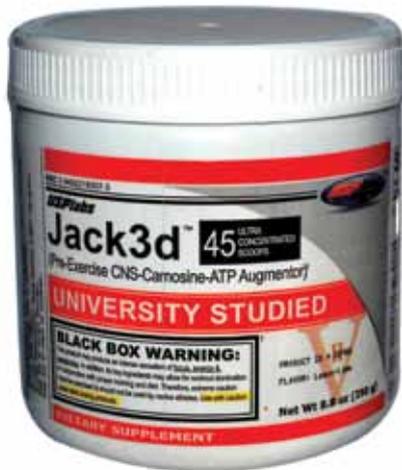
Moreover, trying to keep a lid on the trade is, as the police and consumer standards regulators have discovered with the online trade in new psychoactive substances, no easy job. Websites and products are constantly changing, and it is difficult for investigators to pin down the guilty parties.

The human desire to be more attractive, fitter, stronger and intelligent goes back to ancient civilizations, as does the myriad of weird and wonderful potions that have claimed to achieve these aims. Our ancestors drank liquid gold to recapture their youth and munched on animal testicles to achieve strength and sexual prowess.

Later, the Victorian era was awash with high street hawkers offering remedies and salves claiming to be anything from 'elixirs of life' to 'nerve tonics'. While some contained active ingredients such as cocaine, cannabis or opium, many were mere placebos made up of inert ingredients, part of a long history of quackery that has thrived on the need to improve on the human body.

"In a way we have come full circle from the age of the remedies and tonics sold in the Victorian age," says McVeigh. "Now you have the same showmanship, with manufacturers making bold claims about what their potions can do for you, but it's operating on an entirely new level because of the growth of the internet".

Whatever the product, they will often be accompanied by reams of pseudo



scientific claims about their potency and trustworthiness. Unfortunately for those who buy into this industry, much of the blurb is not backed up by solid evidence.

A team of researchers at the Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine, Department of Primary Care Health Sciences at the University of Oxford, investigated claims made by the UK's rapidly expanding sports supplement industry, which grew from £70.2m in 2004 to £91m in 2009. They found that around a third of the scientific claims were baseless, but that of those who did refer to research, 8 in 10 of the studies were judged to be at high risk of bias.

The spread of the use of anabolic steroids and human growth hormones has been a central plank in the growth of the enhancement drug industry in the UK. Used since the 1940s, steroids mimic the way testosterone works in the body, triggering protein synthesis and building more muscle tissue. Users say steroids, either orally or injected, can help people get bigger muscles within weeks, instead of months.

Needle exchanges were originally set up for heroin injectors. But in the past five years, these sites have seen a dramatic transformation in clientele. Now some needle exchanges are seeing more steroid using clients than heroin injectors. Feedback from the Druglink Street Drug Trends Survey 2012 revealed several towns and cities of the 20 surveyed – Birmingham, Liverpool, Cardiff, Luton, Nottingham, Newcastle and Penzance – had seen big rises in the number of steroid and human growth hormone users on their patches.

Echoing McVeigh's experiences as one of the UK's leading experts on the growing use of enhancement drugs, needle exchange workers say that in the past decade they have witnessed a

new breed of steroid injector coming in to pick up clean syringes, alongside the old school body builders who have spent years in the gym. These are generally teenagers and young men after a quick fix to get a six-pack, usually in readiness for the summer months.

David Biddle, Deputy Chief Executive at CRI warned that the rise in enhancement drugs had not been ignored by last December's Home Affairs Committee Report on UK drug policy. "There is one area that does not seem to have been sufficiently addressed. Performance and Image Enhancing Drugs are becoming the new hidden addiction," he said.

"In CRI's services around the country, an average of 46% of service users that visit our needle exchanges are injecting steroids and other PIEDs. Unfortunately they often don't believe they have a potential problem or understand the harm they may be causing to their health. There needs to be more education on this so that PIEDs users are alerted to the fact that steroid use can be addictive."

Steroids and human growth hormones have a more direct link to the criminal world than other enhancement drugs. This is in part a result of the fact that steroids are attractive to people whose job relies on being heavily muscled. Not only are steroids popular with bodybuilders, wrestlers, doormen, police and soldiers, but also those involved in organized crime.

In February the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) revealed that steroid abuse was one of three major threats of corruption to the police service. The report, carried out by Transparency International, found many of the 43 police forces in England and Wales were investigating officers who are using steroids and that the drug posed "a significant threat" to the integrity and professionalism of the police service.

New laws introduced in April last year to clamp down on steroid availability and tackle illegal supply by making it illegal to import them for personal use using postal, courier or freight services, McVeigh admits, appear to have had little effect in reducing availability. Like the enforcement and regulation of the trade in new psychoactive substances, it is largely a needle in a haystack exercise which is struggling to cope with the ever expanding globalized market in potions where better strength, intelligence and looks are only a mouse click away.

■ **Max Daly** is a freelance journalist.