

FELINE FRENZY

The intensity of the media storm over the now banned cocaine-ecstasy substitute mephedrone was a phenomenon to behold. Andrew McNicoll examines the part played by the press in one of the most short-lived, yet explosive, drug scares for decades.

'KILLER drug meow meow was outlawed today in a major victory for *The Sun*,' roared Britain's top-selling tabloid on April 16th. Mephedrone had been made a Class B drug, on the back of a month-long media assault sparked by two incidents in early March.

The first was an unsubstantiated report, covered in *The Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Telegraph* and *Metro* on the 8th of March, claiming that 180 pupils had been off sick from a Leicestershire school after taking mephedrone. But the real tipping point came eight days later when Humberside Police briefed journalists that the drug may 'have contributed' to the deaths of two Scunthorpe teenagers.

The circumstances of the deaths were unclear – more of which later – but it mattered little. The tabloids declared mephedrone Britain's latest 'KILLER DRUG!' The deal had been sealed after the heartbroken parents of one of the boys called for mephedrone to be outlawed, telling the BBC "he would be alive if the ban was in place".

The front pages of *The Sun*, *The Express* and *Metro* screamed 'Meow meow kills teens', kicking off a month-long avalanche of broadcast, broadsheet and tabloid coverage. With only weeks until the general election, the mephedrone issue became caught up in the electioneering machine – generating hours of coverage. The government said it would 'take any action' needed over the drug, opposition MPs laid into Downing Street for dragging its heels over a ban and the embattled Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) was caught in the crossfire.

The ACMD's review of mephedrone,

published at the end of March, acknowledged the drug's high 'media profile' but warned that coverage was "not always credible or consistent".

So just how significant an impact did the sheer volume – and the nature – of press coverage have on the public's perception of a drug that blind-sided the authorities through its lightning-quick rise in popularity like no other before it?

Figures from the Nexis UK news monitoring service highlight the extent of the media surge. In the year-long period until the 8th March 2010, the day the '180 school kids off sick' story appeared, the national tabloid and broadsheet press printed 56 mephedrone articles. Yet, the subsequent 39 day period until the mephedrone ban saw 210 articles devoted to meph. A third of these were printed in *The Sun* – amounting to an average of two 'meow meow' pieces per issue.

Polling data from Ipsos MORI shows that six out of 10 people who 'knew something about illegal drugs' cited 'the media' as their primary source of drugs information – three times as many as cited 'government public health campaigns' such as the FRANK service. It's tempting to snipe at tabloid hysteria. But for every worthy *Guardian* comment piece slamming the media's moral panic over mephedrone, there was a *Sun* article, conveying the basic message that the drug is dangerous, reaching over four times as many readers.

Admittedly, there was plenty of tabloid fodder. *The Sun* warned of dealers mixing mephedrone with crystal meth to get kids hooked and peddled jingoistic tales of 'ruthless foreign' meph dealers

plotting to flood Britain with the drug. Labelling mephedrone 'the powder of death', *The Daily Star* bizarrely reported that '90% of Liverpool are on it' and told of South African crime gangs stockpiling the killer drug in order to target fans at this summer's World Cup. Meanwhile, *The People* reported on a schoolboy 'going through the same horrific cold turkey withdrawal as a heroin junkie' after spending his lunch money on meow meow.

Disregarding outlandish tabloid tales – including the fact users actually called it 'meow meow' – a look at some of the key mephedrone stories highlights a series of altogether more subtle distortions of 'the facts' on the drug, particularly the reporting of alleged fatalities.

The ACMD's mephedrone report found that the drug could be linked to 26 fatalities in Britain, 18 of which were in England. But it was careful to qualify the statistic. "I'm not saying that 18 deaths in England can be attributed to misuse of mephedrone," Les Iversen, the council's chairman said. "We don't know that yet, so let's not be too hasty in our conclusions."

The omission, deliberately or otherwise, of key qualifying statements on 'meph deaths' was commonplace. The Scunthorpe fatalities that triggered the media meltdown are a prime example. Keen to put out a public health warning about mephedrone's potential dangers, Humberside Police 'linked' the drug to the deaths.

The important word here is 'linked'. The boys had been drinking and potentially using the heroin substitute methadone. This meant alcohol and

methadone could also be 'linked' to the fatalities. Yet the *Metro* and *Daily Express* declared 'Meow meow kills two teens' and *The Sun* reported that 'Two teenage pals have died after taking legal drug meow meow'. None of these pieces mentioned any potential 'link' to alcohol or methadone.

A week later, a 24-year old factory worker died in York in 'unexplained circumstances.' North Yorkshire Police, suspecting that the woman may have used mephedrone, issued a press release warning of the drug's dangers. A statement from Detective Chief Inspector Nigel Costello read: "Although at this time it cannot be determined whether mephedrone is present within the deceased's system or whether the drug played any part in her death, the police would like to warn people about the use of the drug and its potentially lethal consequences".

Despite this, *The Sun* labelled Waters as 'UK Victim No.8' and the 'latest reveller to die from meow meow'. *The Daily Mail* followed suit, describing her as 'the latest suspected victim of the deadly legal high.' DCI Costello was quoted in both pieces but his qualifying statement on the lack of evidence around mephedrone's involvement was nowhere to be seen.

In all suspected drug deaths the role, if any, played by substances in fatalities can only be determined after a coroner's report has been published. Humberside Police and North Yorkshire Police told *Druglink* that inquests into the two Scunthorpe 'mephedrone deaths' and the Lois Waters case will take place in summer 2010 at the earliest.

The media jumping the gun on 'meow meow' deaths prior to coroners' reports is nothing new. Last December *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph* declared that 'meow meow' had killed 14-year old Gabi Price. Yet when the coroner's report arrived in December it found that Price had died of natural causes. None of the papers that ran the original story printed a correction and Price's death is still being 'linked to mephedrone' – lending undue weight to the 'killer drug' claims.

Even in cases where post-mortems had been carried out, the tabloids' thirst to back-up this narrative saw inconvenient details buried or left out altogether. *The Sun* described a London law student as having 'died after a meow binge'. The fact that post-mortem tests revealed the victim was two and a half times over the drink drive limit and had also used GHB and valium was buried in paragraph six.

During the mephedrone panic, emotive language was employed to great

effect. The drug was painted as viciously felling innocent victims, among them a 'happy normal girl', 'keen sportsman', a 'talented chef' and a 'loving and bubbly' trainee hairdresser. These moving tributes bear little comparison with descriptions of the 14 victims of the recent anthrax-contaminated heroin outbreak. "A JUNKIE has been infected by anthrax," was the extent of *The Sun's* heartwarming coverage with the *Daily Mail* saying "a drug addict has died after using heroin contaminated with anthrax spores."

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Parallels can be drawn with the way ecstasy deaths were reported in the mid-nineties, particularly that of Leah Betts in 1995. In his book *Drugs and Popular Culture*, Paul Manning, says that the explosion in media coverage of ecstasy is partly due to the 'threat to the innocent'. While heroin addiction was portrayed as a problem of the underclass, the scourge of ecstasy was seen as a different beast. "In the minds of journalists," Manning asks "might it be that ecstasy is more newsworthy because it is understood as a threat to 'respectable' middle-class families?".

There is certainly evidence that, historically, the media has paid more attention to ecstasy deaths than those linked to other drugs. A recent analysis by the *Information is Beautiful* website found the media reported 106 per cent of ecstasy deaths in 2008 (of the 47 deaths reported, three were found to have no link with ecstasy), compared to nine per cent of heroin-related deaths (897) and two per cent of alcohol-related deaths (685). Meanwhile a review of Scottish drug death reporting in 2001 by Alasdair Forsyth, now of Caledonian University, found that every ecstasy death was reported in the newspapers, compared to one in 50 diazepam deaths and one in

three amphetamine deaths.

It's not without consequence either. In 2008, the ACMD's review into ecstasy warned that "the skewed reporting of ecstasy against the landscape of other drug-related harms and deaths is a real phenomenon and may heavily impact on public perception".

It's a safe bet that the blanket coverage of mephedrone in recent months has left very few people with the impression that the drug is harmless. But it seems equally likely that the swathe of 'killer drug' stories have created a disconnect between common perception of mephedrone's harms and the reality of the situation.

This skewed view of mephedrone may have been tempered by the fact the media firestorm also appears to have prompted people to get in touch with more reliable sources of information on the drug's effects. In March and April, as the media's meph meltdown peaked, DrugScope's mephedrone information page received 92,228 hits – ten times the amount of traffic that had been seen in January and February. Records from the government's FRANK drugs advice helpline show that mephedrone accounted for over one in five calls (22 per cent) in March, compared with just four per cent of calls in November 2009.

At the time of writing mephedrone coverage has died down. Instead, just as *The Times* asked 'is mephedrone the new ecstasy?' back in January 2010, now the media are tripping over themselves to find 'the new mephedrone'. *The Mirror* are backing 'MDAI' as 'meow meow's successor', *The Independent* have declared 'Sparkle' as the nation's 'new party drug' while *The Times* say 'Sub coca dragon' is the latest meph alternative.

Meanwhile on the 31st March, *The Sun* revealed a legal highs peddler had 'turned whistleblower' to warn the nation's kids of the dangers of a new legal substance called 'NRG-1'. "I want to do the right thing," the dealer said. "There needs to be serious action taken, driven by facts and not hysteria."

Yet with little sense of irony, *The Sun* ran the story under the headline 'NRG-1 is 25p a hit and will kill many more than meow'. Labelling the substance, 'Britain's worst nightmare' the red top warned that the drug was '13 times STRONGER than coke and more ADDICTIVE than heroin' and would lead to enough 'mass brain damage and death...to fill an Olympic stadium'. Old habits, it seems, die hard.

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