

Grant frozen after ministers see ecstasy leaflet

Tabloid press urge parents to 'dump' author in Mersey

A government grant to the Mersey Drug Training and Information Centre has been withheld following a tabloid press storm over the ecstasy information in the centre's *Chill Out* leaflet. Mersey Regional Health Authority, which funded the initial 20,000 pilot print run, says it backs the centre and the leaflet, but may nevertheless require criticised passages to be revised in a new edition.

Advance copies of a Home Office press release announcing the allocation of the Seized Assets Fund listed a grant of nearly £15,000 to the Mersey centre for an ecstasy campaign, but the item was missing from the final press release dated 30 January.

The official government line is that ministers had been "actively considering" the Mersey centre's ecstasy campaign but had frozen the grant pending further information about the campaign.

The previous evening recipients of the advance notice were told the item had been deleted at the request of the government's Public Relations Branch, and were instructed to keep its earlier inclusion secret.

Press release rewritten

Earlier on the 29 January front-page banner headlines in the *Sun* and the *Daily Star* had blasted the Mersey centre's *Chill Out* leaflet for claiming the "deadly drug ecstasy is good for your sex life" and "telling youngsters it's OK to use ecstasy".

Alerted by the press coverage, Home Office and Department of Health ministers had obtained copies of the leaflet and were concerned that it might form part of the project they were being asked to fund. Ministers were planning the next day to extract PR benefits from the allocation of the Seized Assets Fund; the PR risks from the revelation that part of the money might support a publication branded as encouraging drug use were enough to force a last-minute decision not to fund the Mersey centre's project.

In fact *Chill Out* was not to be part of the Mersey ecstasy campaign, which is planned to involve prevalence research and harm reduction information for parents.

The storm over *Chill Out* illustrates that, despite increasing professional and government acceptance, a high profile harm reduction approach can still

generate sufficient media reaction to threaten official funding. But hints from Whitehall that the grant will be reinstated once the fuss has died down and the regional health authority's defence of the leaflet suggest that officials and politicians may now feel confident enough to stop short of a withdrawal of support.

Tabloid storm

The incident started on the 28 January with a front-page story in the *Liverpool Echo* about the "glossy drugs leaflet that every Merseyside parent will view with outrage". Overseas Development Minister and local MP Lynda Chalker complained that *Chill Out* told readers "how to take [drugs] safely" instead of "hammering home the message that drugs are wrong and drugs kill".

Ignoring the leaflet's large-type warning that "Using any drug

involves risks", the *Echo* interpreted its cautions about regular use as "suggesting that occasional use... could be harmless". Filtered via the *Star* and the *Sun*, in the *Daily Mail* (31 January) this claim transformed itself into the assertion that *Chill Out* claimed "Ecstasy was 'virtually harmless'" — no such words appear in the leaflet.

The press campaign reached its nadir in a *Star* editorial (29 January) suggesting local parents find out where the leaflet's authors "hang out" and then "storm the place and dump all 20,000 copies of this pernicious pamphlet deep in the Mersey. Followed by Mr O'Hare".

Pat O'Hare, director of the Mersey Drug Training and Information Centre, was shaken by the attacks on a leaflet which the regional health authority had had OK'd by local police, doctors and drug experts. To its credit the originator of the scare, the *Liverpool Echo*, balanced its coverage by giving Pat O'Hare and the leaflet's author Alan Matthews a page to reply and running a letters page on the issue in which 13 out of the 16 letters supported the leaflet.

A columnist in the *Echo*'s sister paper the *Daily Post* defended the leaflet's harm reduction approach (3 February) while a leader in the *Manchester Evening News* (4 February) criticised the media coverage and said "Pat O'Hare is quite right. Screaming from a high moral standpoint merely provokes the rebellious tendencies of the kids".

How Mersey Regional Health Authority will react to the controversy is unclear. The region's chair Sir Donald Wilson, a long-time supporter of Mersey's harm reduction initiatives, is on record as backing the leaflet as one closely targeted at people likely to be using ecstasy. However, a letter from a district health authority chair to Lynda Chalker admits that some of *Chill Out*'s phraseology is unacceptable and promises that it will not be reprinted in its current form.

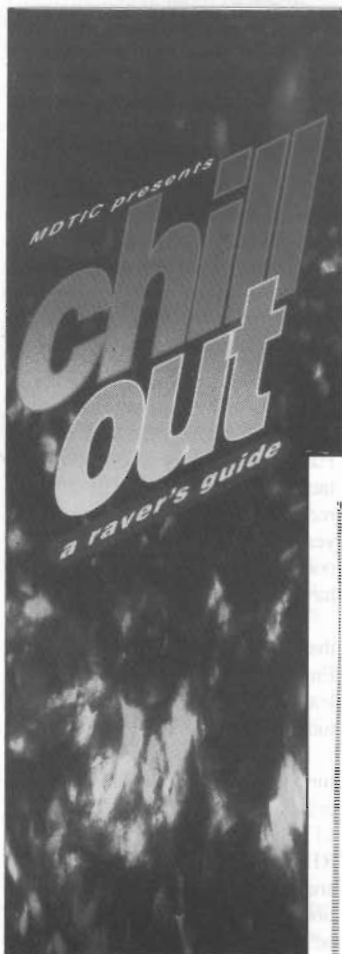
Underneath the press overreaction, Pat O'Hare admits there is a legitimate issue to be addressed. He accepts that the leaflet will be read by non-users of ecstasy who may be tempted to try the drug, but points out that even shock-horror educational approaches lead to increased use among some individuals.

Harm reduction dilemma

The dilemma is sharper for *Chill Out* because in attempting to gain credibility with ecstasy users the leaflet acknowledges the drug's positive effects from the user's point of view. The assumption is that any harm arising from a few non-users being led to use the drug will be outweighed by the reduction of the harm they and existing users suffer as a result of that use.

An evaluation of the impact of the pilot print run may provide evidence to back this assumption.

Officially Mersey RHA are saying their decision on reprinting the leaflet will be influenced solely by the evaluation results but it's likely that the media reaction will at least lead to the toning down of the few sentences which provided the hook for the criticism.



Incitement to violence from the paper that claims the *Chill Out* leaflet encourages drug misuse

THE DAILY STAR SAYS

Menace on the Mersey

THE drug Ecstasy is a deadly menace to our youngsters.

It is firmly in the Class A danger category after claiming at least seven lives and hooking 500,000 kids.

The *Daily Star* has constantly warned about the peril and, naturally, we assumed we'd be backed by everyone involved in combating drug abuse.

But we reckoned without the mutton-heads of the Mersey Drug Training and Information Centre.

They have spent £1,500 of public money printing 20,000 copies of a leaflet claiming the sinister substance is "virtually harmless" when used infrequently and with caution.

This evil twaddle was written by Centre boss Pat O'Hare and his staff. Local parents should discover where these oddballs hang out.

Then they should storm the place and dump all 20,000 copies of this pernicious pamphlet deep in the Mersey.

Followed by Mr O'Hare

FOR MORE INFORMATION

■ CHILL OUT: A RAVER'S GUIDE. Mersey Drug Training and Information Centre, 1991.

Minimum 100 copies at £0.40 each, discounts for 500+.

The leaflet slammed by the *Star*. Available from MDTIC, 27 Hope Street, Liverpool L1 9BQ, phone 051 709 3511.

■ RESPONDING TO RECREATIONAL DRUG USE.

Peter McDermott et al. *Druglink*: 7(1), p.12-13.

The rationale behind *Chill Out*. Copies from ISSD's library, phone 071 430 1993.