

A Druglink investigation has found that, despite being made illegal three years ago, ketamine is not only growing in popularity but is being taken in higher doses. Lena Corner reports



K MART

At the Glastonbury music festival in summer 2008, police seized double the amount of the hallucinogenic anaesthetic drug ketamine than they did the previous year.

"The figures are significantly higher. We've had a lot of seizures and we are very concerned," says Peter Gray, the drug and chemical liaison officer for Avon and Somerset police.

"Ketamine is turning up all over the force area now - we're talking about 600 grams since January. When you consider it's sold in one and half gram amounts, that's an awful lot of deals."

Glastonbury is not the only place where ketamine has remained popular since it was made illegal, as Class C drug, in January 2006.

Of the 20 UK towns and cities surveyed for September's *Druglink Street Drug Trends 2008*, nine - Portsmouth, London, Bristol, Ipswich, Birmingham, Nottingham, Sheffield, Blackpool and Newcastle - reported that they had seen a rise in ketamine use in the previous 12 months.

According to the Independent Drug Monitoring Unit (IDMU) between 1998 and 2000 there were 60-65,000 users in the UK. By 2007 that figure had risen to 85-90,000. It seems that the 14-year maximum sentence now dished out to ketamine dealers has failed to act as a deterrent.

Pete Weinstock a senior practitioner with the Bristol Drug Project says he became aware of rising numbers of

heavy ketamine users earlier this year. "In this area it's a very pervasive problem, we are surrounded by it - there is a whole social network on it," says Weinstock. Police in Bristol have reported a steep rise in seizures of the drug, while drug services say ketamine is being used by more young people and increasingly by primary crack and heroin users.

Weinstock interviewed 36 local users and says he was shocked by the findings. "It used to be a tiny bit from the corner of a credit card," reported a local student, "now I'm on between 1g and 6g every day." One 20-year old female user informed Weinstock that she had just had an operation to have her bladder removed after heavy ketamine use

caused horrific problems with her urinary tract. And then there's the man who built up to an incredible 25g a day habit in the space of just 18 months – the highest Weinstock has heard of.

"The alarming thing about ketamine is that tolerance increases very, very rapidly," he says. "It doesn't take long to get to the very extreme end of using. People believe ketamine dependence is rare but I don't think that's true. I think it's going to be a huge problem."

Meanwhile in Nottingham, Donna Stenton who works at NHS harm reduction project, The Health Shop, says in the past six months the number of people coming to see her who are injecting ketamine has tripled. She describes her typical client as a young university student who started taking ketamine recreationally – there is one 'hippy' club in particular in Nottingham, which is notorious for heavy ketamine use.

As their tolerance develops they find they are no longer able to go into the heavy hallucinatory state known as the 'K-hole', usually reached after taking 200mg of ketamine, so they start injecting to get the high. Before long they find themselves on 4g a day. "I soon realised," says Stenton "that ketamine wasn't as harmless as we all first thought."

Neil Brooks, the manager of Nottingham based drug project Chill Out Sound Support, has been working closely with Stenton and is now planning to develop a leaflet to alert people to the dangers of ketamine becoming more than just a night time drug. What they are witnessing, he says, in Nottingham at least, is a definite shift into an entirely different area of ketamine use. Daily users are unable to function in normal life and more worrying, he says, is that the sector of people who are now injecting are not heroin and crack users, but people from the club scene who traditionally would have looked down on "smackheads" and been appalled at the thought of injecting.

Dr Karenza Moore, a lecturer in criminology at Lancaster University, has been working with ketamine users on the less harmful end of the scale – studying recreational users in night clubs. These are people who use a 'bump' of ketamine (10-30mg) for a feeling of euphoria, the onset of the

of the Government's decision to make ketamine an illegal drug. "One of the main things that came out of our

research is that since classification, ketamine users didn't report any change in terms of availability or price. It was no easier and no harder to get hold of since being made illegal. That fact leads us to question the deterrent value of current British drug policy."

Nor does classification seem to have stemmed the supply of ketamine onto the street. One drug dealer who works in a large city in north-west England says his customers have not changed their ketamine buying habits since it was criminalised. He still gets his from the same supplier, who gets it from a distributor in Liverpool where it comes in to the docks, "as with most of the drugs in the north-west".

Because ketamine is a clear, odourless substance, it was very easy to import. Traditionally it was bought over the counter in India and smuggled back to the UK in rose water bottles. Half a litre, which costs about £300, dries down to make about 50 grams of powder. So at an average of selling price of £30 a gram, it's a lucrative business.

It is the new terrorism laws that have impacted ketamine's supply route more than classification, because the ban

on liquids means that people can no longer stroll onto flights with bottles of ketamine in their hand luggage.

Matthew Southwell, a one-time ketamine user who now helps develop responses to emerging drug trends, says the classification of ketamine has meant that people are no longer able to import ketamine into the UK by the pallet-load. But, he says, new methods of getting the drug through customs are emerging, such as adding food colouring to bottles to mask it as soft drinks or other products. "After all," says Southwell, "what are they going to do? Sip every bottle of liquid that comes into the country?"

Over the past decade the price of ketamine has plummeted. "When I started taking in the mid-1990s," says

continued on p7



Special K? above and over the page: The effects of high doses of ketamine can be viewed on YouTube in clips which claim to show people high on the drug

'wonkey donkeys' (wobbly legs) and a few visuals. It is, said one of the people she surveyed, "the most fun you can have for twenty quid."

IT'S A VERY PERVERSIVE PROBLEM, WE ARE SURROUNDED BY IT – THERE IS A WHOLE SOCIAL NETWORK ON IT

But she too reports a dramatic increase in users. "Numbers have tripled in the past ten years," she says and is critical



THE SPECIALIST: 'KETAMINE KATY', 35, FROM LONDON

I was squatting in London in the early 1990s with one of the first people to start bringing it in to the country. They bought it in pharmacies in India and sent it over in rose water bottles. My friend the dealer used to take the label off the rosewater bottle and wear it on his jacket. It was a sign to let other ketamine users know that he was dealing.

When we got caught on ketamine the police just used to laugh at us. 'If you want to do that, it's up to you, it's not illegal, but why would you want to?' All they could see was us rolling around the floor, vomiting and having a great time. They were disgusted with us and looked down on us with contempt. But they could only see what was going on on the outside. When you're on ket you literally don't know which way the floor is. You can't walk or see or talk but the fact is you're having the most amazing hallucinogenic experience.

I was part of a group who didn't really use it as a party drug. We used to stay in and do it because everything got so crazy you wouldn't want to be out in a club on it. We believed using it was almost like a religious experience. My strongest hallucination was when I fell asleep on the guy who used to bring it

over from India. I looked at him and he had turned into one of those Egyptian gods with a shiny black dog's head. He was looking down on thousands and thousands of people who were all standing on some steps below him, worshipping him. I walked with him through a village to his home. I could have told you exactly what was on the wall in this man's home before we even got there. I knew all this man's memories and thoughts - I'd literally slipped into another person's head through time and space.

MY FRIEND THE DEALER USED TO TAKE THE LABEL OFF THE ROSEWATER BOTTLE AND WEAR IT ON HIS JACKET. IT WAS A SIGN TO LET OTHER KETAMINE USERS KNOW THAT HE WAS DEALING

With ketamine the hallucinations are so intact you can smell them. For us it was never 'raver's smack'. We saw it as a way of gaining knowledge.

It got to the point where I was having conversations with higher selves and gods. I still believe to this day my intelligence grew in leaps and bounds because of it. One day I had this trip that the gods told me they had taught me all they could and then from that moment on, weirdly ketamine started making me puke horrifically. I'm not sure what happened, whether the stuff they were bringing over was different or whether it was mixed with other things, but every time I took it I turned into a bubble machine producing foaming vomit.

I first took it when I was 18 and now I'm 35. One thing we didn't realise back then was that it could ever become a problem drug. We didn't think you could become addicted to it but it transpired that quite a few of us were becoming hooked. There is a real hardcore of people who are still on it, all these years later and are trying to get off it. I think that's why it is important it is illegal because you can become dependent on it. I'm not a fan of smack and I think with heavy use ketamine has a similar sort of feeling - that it's taking your soul. And at that point it turns into something else. We weren't aware of any of that at the beginning.

Southwell, "we were paying £50 a gram – it was a luxury alongside cocaine. Now you can get it for silly prices." Indeed Pete Weinstock from the Bristol Drug Project says he regularly sees ketamine for as little as £6-£10 a gram. "It's cheaper than alcohol or anything else," he says. According to the annual Druglink Street Drug Trends survey, which first revealed the extent of ketamine's popularity in 2005, the average price of a gram in the UK has fallen from £40 to £30 in the last three years.

DO THEY REALLY THINK THAT A POTENTIAL KETAMINE USER IS NOW GOING TO STOP AND SAY THIS IS A CLASS C DRUG, I'D BETTER NOT SAY NO. IT'S LAUGHABLE

The price drop has introduced new, younger users to the drug. Their lack of experience means they are not capable of monitoring dose size or tolerance levels effectively. "These kids are choosing to use ketamine on a night out because in some ways it mimics the effect of a high dose of alcohol," says Southwell. "Now they're thinking for fifteen quid, me and my mate can go out



all night and get off our faces which, if we were drinking, would cost forty quid."

The general perception of ketamine, when taken recreationally, is that it's

not a problem drug. Its notoriety as a horse tranquilizer belies the fact that it's such a safe anesthetic it's also used on pregnant women and children in medical settings.

In February 2008 an article published in the Journal of Clinical Psychopharmacology stated that there were 23 ketamine-related deaths in the UK between 1993 and 2006. But the majority of these weren't due to effects of the drug itself, but accidents happening while people were on it – such as getting run over and falling off balconies. The most recent death recorded is the case of a 30-year old man who was found dead last July in a flotation tank after taking a large dose of ketamine. He had managed to drown face up in about a foot of salt water.

Side effects of ketamine use can include damage to the urinary tract, bladder and sometimes the kidneys. Unfortunately it is difficult for GPs to differentiate between the symptoms of ketamine-related damage and those of a bladder infection, so the problem can be misdiagnosed.

Southwell, who has worked with a group of ketamine users in London who had developed a daily habit, says when they went to the local drug service to ask for help they were offered methadone. "It's a shockingly bad service," says Southwell. "The problem is, there's no awareness of what this population needs."

Despite increasing and more problematic use of the drug, it is unlikely ketamine will sweep through club land like ecstasy did. Its hallucinogenic and sometimes debilitating effects are not to everyone's taste – which is why the drug is known as the 'Marmite' of the illicit market.

And the continued rise of ketamine is by no means a phenomenon that is affecting the whole of the UK – it still remains elusive in places such as Middlesbrough, Glasgow and Belfast. It seems that we have our own self-imposed limit of our interest in the drug that no government ruling will ever affect. As one user put it: "Do they really think that a potential ketamine user is now going to stop and say this is a Class C drug, I'd better not say no. It's laughable."

■ **Lena Corner** is Living Review Editor of the *Independent on Sunday*

KETAMINE: THE FACTS

- Ketamine (otherwise known 'Special K' and 'Katie') was invented by Parke-Davis laboratories in 1962. Despite its reputation as a horse tranquilizer it is in fact generally regarded as a relatively safe anaesthetic and is used frequently on pregnant women and children in medical settings.
- At doses of 100mg or less users report a mild trippy effect and feelings of euphoria. At higher dosages users talk about hallucinations, or entering the heavy hallucinatory state of a 'K-hole' – when the body starts to pass on from a dissociative state into anaesthesia.
- The drug became popular on the 1970s spirituality scene, but remained a niche substance until the early 1990s, when it became big in London's gay clubs. Throughout the decade it became increasingly popular on the UK club scene when it became known as 'raver's smack' and was used alongside other drugs such as ecstasy and cocaine.
- Ketamine is available to buy over the counter in India. It is a colourless, odourless substance which importers used to smuggle into the country in bottles of rose water.
- On 1 January 2006 the Home Office decided to make ketamine an illegal substance by making it a Class C drug, on a par with anabolic steroids and GHB.