

Keeping tabs on

*Thus it came about that, one bright May morning,
I swallowed four-tenths of a gram of mescaline dissolved in
half a glass of water and sat down to wait for the results*

Aldous Huxley, 1956

LEGAL or herbal highs have been festival favourites for many years. Recognised as a safer and less potent alternative to their illegal counterparts, they have become a popular choice among those seeking altered states of mind without the negative consequences associated with illicit substances. Until fairly recently, these so-called legal 'highs' appeared to be nothing other than psychedelically packaged mixtures of herbs with little more effect than making a nasty smell when you smoked them, or improving the flavour of your Bolognese.

HERBALS ON A HIGH

Increasingly, those seeking an alternative to illicit drugs are buying a growing number of apparently stronger herbal highs. The internet and the abundance of 'head' shops make such legal highs easy to access and use, with magic mushrooms, peyote, kratom and salvia amongst some of the more popular choices.

According to the owner of one internet-based head shop in the south of England, one of the biggest sellers, alongside magic mushrooms, is salvia. Though many types of salvia exist – the herb sage being one – the potent form is salvia divinorum. It is swallowed as herbs, pills or capsules, or smoked. It is hallucinogenic and acting as a stimulant. It is being bought in the main by 18 to 24-year-olds. Do a search on eBay and you will find living plants for sale and numerous other sites selling salvia products. In fact, though the plant is now a banned substance in Italy, Australia and Denmark, it is readily available in plant nurseries in the UK.

Not all legal highs are as popular. Many products, such as BlissXtra, containing aserone, the Herbal Kick range, marketed as 'herbal supplements to give an energy boost', and XTC, advertised as a 'liquid form of legal ecstasy', have few repeat buys at this site, indicating that purchases don't quite produce the kick they're purported to.

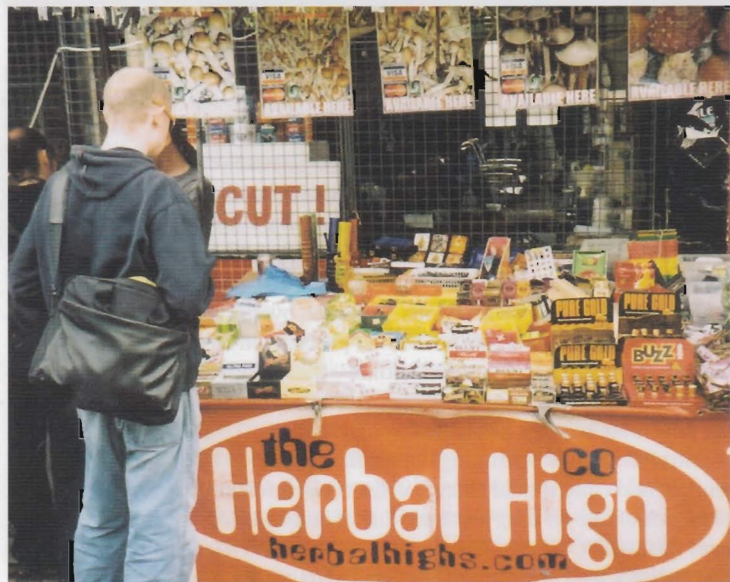
LESS RISK?

Mike Linnell, of drug advice agency Lifeline, says the properties of most of the plants and substances available at head shops are at such low dosage, particularly in comparison to other, illegal versions, that they are unlikely to lead users into difficulties. "The illicit drugs on the market are cheaper, stronger and preferred by those seeking an intense effect – but using them involves a risk of getting arrested or ripped off," says Linnell. "Buying from head shops involves no such risk. Using drugs purchased from head shops is not safe, but is far safer than using street drugs as the product is more



Legal highs such as the herb salvia are becoming a popular choice at 'head' shops because they offer a mellow, legal buzz.

But, says **Andrea Wren**, drug services need to wise up because natural does not necessarily mean safe



Natural highs: peyote (top), salvia (opposite left) and datura (opposite right)

A herbal high stand in Camden market, north London (above)

likely to do exactly what it says on the tin."

There is a growing awareness by young users of other 'natural highs' in circulation which are less commonly traded in head shops. In August last year the *Observer* reported that a young German student cut off his own tongue and penis after drinking a tea made from Angel's Trumpet (*Datura Stramonium*). The article claimed that there have been several deaths in the USA related to this hallucinogenic wild flower and that its use is increasing in Britain.

It is extremely difficult to obtain information on the number of young people in the UK using plants such as Angel's Trumpet. According to Linnell, very few people who use hallucinogens access drug services, where data could be obtained. Clearly, the issue cannot be ignored, though a wise approach might be to improve on existing knowledge, rather than imagine British youths wandering around the streets high on Angel's Trumpet and collapsing all over the place.

Andrea Wren is a freelance journalist

the herbal highs



CHEAP AND TRENDY

Andrea Zangara is a researcher in psychopharmacology in the Department of Human Cognitive Neuroscience at Northumbria University. He is one of few academics to have studied the use of legal and natural highs in other parts of Europe, and is attempting to generate support and funding in Britain to continue his research. He is concerned that young people are increasingly using the more powerful 'naturals'.

"Levels of knowledge amongst professionals regarding legal highs is not growing at the same rate as the interest amongst young people," Zangara says. "Cheap, trendy and readily available, these highs are a source of legal entertainment that seems almost too good to be true."

Zangara's first research project on legal highs looked at Holland, where, with colleagues, he developed a model for Europe regarding the sale of 'smart' and 'eco' drugs, based on the Dutch smart shops. They sell a range of powders, pills, dried plants and hallucinogens as natural imitations of their illegal stimulant and dance counterparts such as ecstasy and amphetamine, or designed for their 'tripping' qualities. Not necessarily 'herbal', the research found they are popular among young users who want to supplement their other drug use, or prefer to indulge purely within the safety net of legality.

The Dutch shops supply up-to-date, relevant product information and distribute safety advice regarding illegal substances. Zangara would like to see the UK follow suit, with head shops offering full product advice on their merchandise and signposting for young people to substance misuse services where necessary.

Dave Wilson, a young people's drug worker based in Stockport, would welcome the opportunity to link up with head shops. He says: "Because a disaster hasn't happened yet doesn't mean that we shouldn't be prepared. The Liverpool-based drug organisation, HIT,

“Levels of knowledge amongst professionals regarding legal highs is not growing at the same rate as the interest amongst young people”

has already started to address the rise in sales of magic mushroom kits by producing a new leaflet on the subject. I also think that many head shops are already behaving responsibly by giving basic harm reduction advice and not selling to under-18s.”

NOTION OF LEGALITY

It goes without saying that all that is natural is not necessarily safe. Young users often associate 'natural' with 'harmless'. As the belief of 'safe' is so much part of the sales deal with herbal highs, we need to educate users about any potential dangers. Young people tend to think that natural highs are safe, just as they tend to believe that alcohol is harmless, because 'everyone drinks it'.

This dilemma resides in the notion of legality. Services who work with young people are familiar with the difficulties in conveying messages regarding the hazards of the legal drugs that society utilises such as alcohol and tobacco. We live in a culture where legal equals safe (and acceptable), and illegal equals harmful (and unacceptable). A culture of drinking and smoking to excess continues to masquerade as acceptable, regardless of the harm, because it is legal.

The response from services would suitably be focused on increasing their knowledge base and taking the approach based on Zangara's work in the Netherlands, rather than anticipating a new wave of young users who have severe problems with their use of natural highs.

The way society sells the idea of legal and illicit is probably the continuing and deeper cause for concern, rather than a sudden boom in the numbers of young people getting into problematic use with natural highs. As long as there is continuous persistence in notions of acceptability based on legal status, attempting to send appropriate messages according to the psychopharmacology of the substance used, rather than of how it fits into societal perceptions, will be an unrelenting crusade. ■