

# Message on a bottle

*It has killed five times more people in the last decade than cocaine, ecstasy and speed put together, but solvent misuse has always been the ugly sister of the drug field. That could soon change, as slogans like Solvent Abuse Can Kill Instantly appear on our deodorants and lighter refills. But, as one of Britain's leading experts on solvents writes, this could be a waste of money, time and lives*

TWO YEARS AGO, THE ACMD published its *Volatile Substance Abuse* report. It was the first time the Council had produced a publication devoted to just one type of substance misuse, and was therefore a highly significant 'landmark' report. In particular, the ACMD recommended that careful consideration should be given to the labelling of potentially abusable products, and as a direct result, the Department of Trade and Industry's Consumer Safety Unit sponsored a programme of consumer research on the practicalities of labelling. The research, concluded earlier this year, endorsed the idea of labelling and the message which was seen as 'the most impactful and effective' was *Solvent Abuse Can Kill Instantly*.<sup>1</sup> It was further recommended that this warning should be positioned on the front of the product pack.

## The pollster's dilemma

Obviously, it is extremely difficult to conduct research that conclusively demonstrates the benefits of labelling. This would require a controlled experimental study to test the efficacy of warning labels versus none, and certain wordings compared to others. Such a study – if possible at all – would certainly be expensive and lengthy. The researchers have therefore relied on people's opinions about labelling and their responses to different messages.

This makes the assumption that there is a direct relationship between what people say they like about a product, what they say that they will do in relation to it (buy or not buy), and what they will actually do – the pollster's dilemma. The report states that, "on-pack information is read ... and such information has the potential to influence behaviour."

But this is a weak claim. Anything has the *potential* to influence. The question is – does it?

The assumption that people do what they say they will do is an especially surprising one for marketing experts to make. Advertising isn't an exact science, so consumers would be very likely to say that warning labels were a good idea and that

they would positively influence their purchasing decisions – because they have very little reason to say otherwise. So the statistic that "90 per cent of consumers in the quantitative survey said that they thought the use of warning labels was a 'good idea'" doesn't actually tell us very much about their buying behaviour.

The report also notes that, "Young people take the view that the more information they have about health related issues, the better able they are to make sound decisions." Again, this is an unsurprising finding: what did the researchers expect young people to say? *No we don't want to know about the dangers of VSA. The less information we have, the better?* But – and here's the rub – is there really any evidence that the provision of information on its own is a good idea?

## Information is not education

Had the researchers looked at the evidence on the effectiveness of drug education they might not have endorsed young people's views so uncritically. Back in the 'dark ages' of drug education, many educators used to think that scaring young people about drugs would stop them experimenting. The evidence is that it doesn't, and on the contrary, if drug misuse is presented in this way some young people might be attracted to it. Therefore, many educators have eschewed this approach and concentrated on presenting the facts in a non-judgmental manner. While this may have the positive effect of increasing *understanding* about drugs, it does not appear to have much influence on young people's *behaviour*.

Perhaps adults are more likely to read warning labels than young people. The resulting benefit of increased parental awareness would be very welcome. But one of the few things which we *do* know is that the attitude of many parents to VSA is that it couldn't happen to their child, and the proposed wording is likely to reinforce that view.

by

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## Manufacturing concern

Since the proposed labelling scheme would be voluntary, not all manufacturers would implement it. In particular, non-UK manufacturers are unlikely to, given the lack of concern about VSA outside Britain. Although the research reports that consumers will not be put off a labelled product by a warning label, this too is based on what they say rather than on any evidence about what they will actually do if given the choice between a labelled and an unlabelled product.

Because this research is based on an analysis of opinions rather than consumer behaviour, it does not add to our understanding of the potential for warning labels. It was therefore a waste of taxpayers' money. If manufacturers act on this report and label their products as recommended they will probably be wasting their money too, as the balance of evidence is that it will make no difference.

OK – you may say that it shouldn't be any of my business if manufacturers of sniffable products want to spend money sticking labels on their cans. But it *is* my business. There's a very real danger that manufacturers who label will think that they have 'done their bit' and stop funding other initiatives. Currently, manufacturers and distributors of potentially sniffable products sponsor a wide range of prevention projects aimed at reducing solvent misuse. The British Aerosol Manufacturers Association has funded publications and educational initiatives while the British Adhesives and Sealants Association was involved in setting up the charity *Re-Solv*. If a great deal of time, effort and money is spent on labelling, manufacturers may be less likely not only to involve themselves in such programmes (retailer training and parent education are also urgently required), but also to pursue the search for other technical solutions such as product or container modification.

It would be a great pity if the laudable efforts of manufacturers and distributors to reduce the risk of their products being misused were frittered away on an initiative which is of dubious effectiveness, when there are interventions which have more chance of reducing the problem. ○

1. The Qualitative Consultancy. *Volatile Substance Abuse: Product Labelling Final Report*. March 1997.