

NEWS VALUES

What messages do young people get from media reporting on illegal drugs? Does it make them attracted to drugs, fear them, or just confused? A ground breaking Australian study has come up with some answers. By **Caitlin Hughes, Kari Lancaster, Francis Mathew-Simmons and Paul Dillon**

Young people's attitude to drugs is often associated with factors such as family upbringing, socio-economic status, the influence of peers and whether or not someone has a propensity to addiction. Meanwhile, the impact of the innocuous and ever present news media is somewhat down played.

In 2001 the editors of the respected journal, *Addiction*, identified the media as a "new battleground" for the drug and alcohol sector. Evidence from numerous fields has found that the media has the power to sway public opinion and affect individual perceptions of risks and norms. Research has also shown that young people are using a variety of multimedia sources for news and current affairs, such as newspapers, magazines, the TV, the internet and mobile phones. They are becoming more selective media consumers – but remain exposed to high levels of news reporting.

Given high levels of media exposure, the pervasiveness of messages around illicit drugs and the fact that young adulthood is the time at which people are most susceptible to taking up drug use, we need to know what the impact

of news media reporting is on young people's attitudes to illicit drugs? Can news media make them more likely to use drugs? Conversely, can it discourage them from trying drugs? And do the effects depend on prior drug experience or knowledge?

Yet, almost ten years on from *Addiction's* declaration, knowledge remains scant as to what extent and in what way the media affects young people's attitudes towards, or demand for, drugs. That is why the National Drug And Alcohol Research Centre, based at the University of New South Wales undertook to explore this area by conducting a national survey to investigate how the media can influence young people's attitudes to illicit substances.

To begin to answer these questions we mimicked the experimental approaches used to determine the impacts of media messages on smoking, and devising an online survey that depicted newspaper clips of the two most commonly used illicit drugs in Australia: cannabis and ecstasy.

For each drug we selected a cross-

section of media messages or portrayals of the likely consequences of using each drug. For cannabis this included portrayals of a mental health problem (psychosis), social problem (educational failure), legal problem (getting arrested) and a portrayal of the acceptability of use (a celebrity behaving badly).

A series of questions were then devised to assess impacts on attitudes to drugs: perceptions of the risks of using illicit drugs, the acceptability of drug use and the likelihood of future use. The survey was launched in early 2010 and with the help of many young people and government agencies, online forums and even the assistance of the Australian media, a total of 2,296 young people aged 16-24 took part. The study, published later this month (September), also analysed 42,000 references to drugs in 11 Australian newspapers over six years.

So what were the key findings? We discovered young people's attitudes to drugs *were* influenced by news media. Particular groups of young people were more influenced than others, namely females and non-users. But attitudes of the general population of 16-24 year olds were also highly affected – more so than previous studies have shown around the media and smoking.

We found the media could both increase or decrease intentions to use illicit drugs. The type of effect was based on the explicit or implied message about drugs: portrayals that endorsed acceptability of drugs (such as celebrities behaving badly) or low risk (such as ecstasy is safer than binge drinking) increased intentions of using illicit drugs. Conversely, portrayals that suggested potential problems from drug use (such as being arrested or having mental health problems) reduced stated intentions to use.

But perhaps the most interesting finding was that portrayals depicting health and social problems were more effective at reducing intentions to use than those depicting problems with the law.

Even recent users who tended to be much less affected by media portrayals were in some cases also affected by portrayals of health and social problems. This was because the health and social messages were more persuasive – young people perceived health and social problems as both the more probable and the more severe risk of illicit drug use. While for many users the probability of overdose was known to be low, the risks were high enough that they could not be completely discounted.

The same could not be said about the risk of arrest: "They're like '80 people

were arrested on drugs charges' and young people are like, 'it's ridiculous, I'll take that risk (cos) there are so many people that are taking drugs.' Yet in Australia, health and social problem messages (such as messages of marginalisation or damage to educational or employment prospects) made up the smallest proportion of news media messages on drugs.

Focus groups with 52 young people provided more insight into how and why media has an impact. They were highly aware that most media messages may not represent the truth. Yet in spite of that, they were still aware that it affects them and their peers.

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Media influences were shaped by a number of factors including message construction. That is, to what extent messages were deemed believable and meaningful to young people. Messages that fit their perceptions could be accepted and shape decisions to use or not use illicit drugs, and to use or not use in harmful ways. But, as shown by two young people, some messages that over-inflated risks were rejected outright: "That's just propaganda", "Cannabis doesn't kill people. It's not lethal, so that's a straight out lie."

Other stories were rejected, or interpreted in different ways, because they did not accord with their direct or indirect knowledge about drugs. An article about an ecstasy overdose provided an example of this. The article mentioned the victim died after consuming three ecstasy pills. For many this was sad and a convincing argument about the dangers of ecstasy use. But youth with greater knowledge about drugs actively rejected the message that 'ecstasy inevitably leads to overdose'. One interviewee said: "I don't think this makes people go 'I'm going to die after a small amount of ecstasy', or like, 'ecstasy is going to kill me full stop'. I think it goes, 'a lot of ecstasy at once is going to kill you'."

Much more research is needed to examine the impacts of media on youth



Hold the front page: Stories depicting health and social problems warned young people off drug use more than stories depicting problems with the law

attitudes and youth demand for drugs. This study needs to be replicated in other nations, such as the UK. We also need further studies that examine impacts of other news media, drug types and media portrayals. A big unknown remains about how other styles of media, particularly entertainment media, impact on youth attitudes and demand.

Yet even based on this initial research there are a number of policy implications. There is a need to recognise that the seemingly innocuous news media is one of the many factors that affects demand for drugs. And given we've shown most messages reduce pro-drug attitudes, news media should be embraced by governments, research centres and non-government agencies as a tool to aid future prevention efforts. We suggest that increasing investment in advocacy and public relations capabilities and more strategic messaging on short and long term harms is likely to pay dividends, because as

summed up by one young Australian: "Media is probably one of the few ways that prevention messages can keep being pushed."

This work has arisen from the forthcoming report: Hughes, C., Spicer, B., Lancaster, K., Matthew-Simmons, F. And Dillon, P. (forthcoming) Media reporting on illicit drugs in Australia: Trends and impacts on youth attitudes to illicit drug use, DPMP Monograph Series: Sydney: NDARC. The project was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, under the National Psychostimulant Initiative.

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