

Police target 'bash' industry

EXCLUSIVE

Max Daly

Police are battling to contain a thriving and lucrative drugs market - in the chemicals used to cut cocaine and heroin.

The market in cutting agents, known on the street as 'bash' or 'smash', has become so established some criminals have ditched selling illegal drugs to deal solely in the chemicals, which are legal to buy and sell. Powders such as the anaesthetic benzocaine, the most common substance used to cut powder cocaine, are vital to dealers if they want to make a worthwhile profit.

Swizzo, who describes himself as a 'fixer' between cocaine and adulterant dealers, told *Druglink*: "Dealing in smash is more attractive than dealing in illegal drugs because it's more profitable and it's not a Class A drug. I know people who make a living out of selling this stuff."

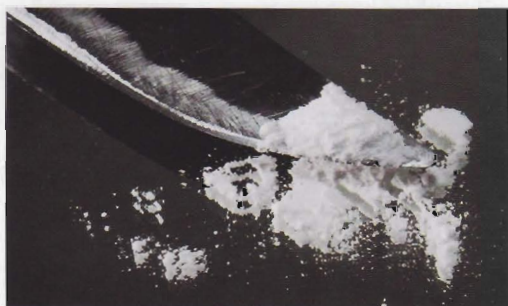
Benzocaine, used in over-the-counter ointments, dentistry and as a fish tranquilliser, is typically being bought from source in countries such as China over the internet for £3,000 a metric ton. The importer then sells the chemical on in 25kg sealed kegs for between £2,000 and £8,000. It is sold to dealers for £200 an ounce, a quarter of the price of an ounce of cocaine.

Most middle level dealers cut their cocaine 50-50 with adulterants - boosting the return gained from buying a £1,000 ounce of cocaine and selling it in 28 £50 grams from £400 to £1,800.

Gangs dealing in the chemicals are being targeted by the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA), which has set up an operation to disrupt the trade. Detectives, who believe the operation has made a sizeable dent in the trade, are arresting gangs after linking shipments of bulking agents to stashes of Class A drugs.

Police are in the process of persuading the Home Office and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to make it easier for dealers in the bash trade to be prosecuted. Police want ministers to introduce a licensing scheme that would force individuals importing large quantities of potential cutting agents to prove they are for legitimate use.

At present people caught with large quantities of cutting agents are being



charged with conspiracy to supply drugs, although the courts have to be convinced that the chemicals would have been used to mix with drugs. However, cutting agents are being treated as actual cocaine in the police's evaluation of how much a haul would be worth on the streets.

But, as enforcement agencies clamp down on the trade in cutting agents, which also include anaesthetics lignocaine and phenacetin, caffeine and tetramisole - a substance given to pets to expel tape worms, there are fears that dealers will turn to less benign substances such as talcum powder and white domestic detergents to 'water down' cocaine.

Inspector Bill Stupples, of Merseyside Police drugs squad, which has made several seizures of benzocaine and lignocaine alongside cocaine in the last year, said: "There is a highly profitable and growing market in supplying 'bash'. We all know what these chemicals are coming into the country for, but they are completely legal and so it is tricky to prosecute."

"We just have to try and convince a court that when someone is caught with a 25kg drum of benzocaine, it is extremely likely that it will be used to cut with cocaine, rather than to stun goldfish while cleaning a garden pond, as some defendants would suggest."

30% - average purity for cocaine seized by police between April and June:

63% - average purity of cocaine recovered by customs officers between April and June

main cocaine adulterants found in police seizures: benzocaine [detected in 43% of seizures], lignocaine [20%] and phenacetin [19%]. Caffeine was found in 97% of heroin seizures by Customs.

DRUGS QUOTE

"I am inquisitive by nature, which has helped me in my job, but in this case it seems to have been my downfall."

PC Jonathan Wynne tells Chester Crown Court how his "natural curiosity" led him to "taste" the contents of a cocaine wrap he found on the floor of a nightclub's toilets.

"It's a fun name. As soon as people look at the can, they smile."

The inventor of 'Cocaine' - a high caffeine energy drink marketed as "the legal alternative" defends his branding.

"The container had been concealed in an intimate body cavity"

A customs officer explaining the whereabouts of a Kinder Surprise egg used by a woman to smuggle in cannabis into Birmingham airport.

"Viva coca! Death to the yankees!"

Bolivian President Evo Morales takes a diplomatic stance on addressing US skepticism of his policies on the industrialization of non-narcotic coca products.

"You'll find doses that purportedly mimic the effects of LSD, crack, heroin and other hard drugs."

USA Today's Kim Komando warns America's parents of "sinister websites" peddling "audio files designed to induce drug-like effects".