

“ROCK-STAR AMOUNTS – AT POCKET-MONEY PRICES”

The ban on mephedrone has done little to reduce its popularity – with some areas witnessing a marked upswing in use – and incidents of self-harm. By **Mike Power**

Although mephedrone was controlled as a Class B drug in 2010, its use would appear to be increasing in some areas according to frontline drugs workers. Now available for as little as £5 a gram, half the pre-ban price, it is even sold in single lines, says Steve Kay, Head of Integrated Youth Support services at North-East Lincolnshire Council.

“And we’re not an isolated case,” said Kay. “It’s still being used over Yorkshire, Humber, Hull and Grimsby. It’s just another street drug now. Use has certainly increased since the ban.” One drugs support service reported that in January one-in-five of its referrals were mephedrone-related. Today, all of them are.

Mephedrone first hit the headlines in 2009 – it was cheap and legal, just a point and click away on the internet. It not only appealed to those who would not normally dabble in illegal drugs, but with cocaine and ecstasy quality at a low ebb, the potency of the new drug meant its popularity grew rapidly, spread by word-of-mouth and online recommendations. Since then many more new drugs are now available, though none have gained the traction on the scene of mephedrone.

In north-east Lincolnshire, Dave Cole, Manager of the North East Substance Team, says the drug is so popular that a multi-agency response was devised to tackle a surge in young people’s referrals for problematic use of the drug.

“The problem is, they’re doing rock star doses – at pocket-money prices,” said Cole. “Some users have reported doing eight grams in a day, and then the same the following day.”



The drug lends itself to compulsive use because the high it gives is intense and brief. 4-MMC, the chemical name for the compound, is highly water-soluble, meaning it hits hard and fast and is metabolised equally quickly, leaving only undesired peripheral effects including a racing heart, long after the euphoric hit fades.

ONE DRUGS SUPPORT SERVICE REPORTED THAT IN JANUARY ONE-IN-FIVE OF ITS REFERRALS WERE MEPHEDRONE-RELATED. TODAY, ALL OF THEM ARE

There have been 20 local admissions to A&E of users in north-east Lincolnshire suffering from the effects of these large doses, said Cole, with many of those

admitted attempting self-harm or even suicide on the comedown from the drug, which users say can prompt extreme anxiety and paranoia.

Mephedrone’s popularity is not isolated to pockets of the UK; the recent British Crime Survey ranked the drug as 4th most popular – on a par with Ecstasy – in the 16-24 age group.

A report in June by Lancaster University criminologist Fiona Measham, along with colleagues from Kings College London, Guys and St Thomas’ NHS Foundation Trust and Kings Health Partners, surveyed 313 individuals over four nights in nightclubs for gay men in south-east London last summer.

Researchers found that 41% of those interviewed had used the drug on that night, indicating that of the new drugs available, again only mephedrone has established a foothold in the clubbing scene.

Although the drug is not now being sold in headshops or on dozens of websites, many dealers are offering it alongside traditional drugs. Supplies of mephedrone dried up briefly in the UK following the ban in the EU and China, where all mephedrone was originally synthesised.

When the mephedrone trade was squeezed out of China, the slack was quickly taken up by Indian firms in 2010. The well-established Indian chemical industry has less oversight than its Chinese counterpart, and for decades has produced much of the ketamine used in the UK and Europe.

■ **Mike Power** is a freelance journalist