

Talk to Frank (or Fridge Magnet)

As the internet takes a more central position in Britain's drug landscape, through the sale of legal highs and proliferation in sites specialising in drugs, more people are turning to unofficial websites as a source of information on psychoactive substances.

Mike Power reports

'Taking drugs is illegal. Talking about them isn't,' intoned an advert for Talk To Frank, the official government drug information service upon its launch in 2003. The service, famous for its Pablo the Drug Mule Dog and Brain Warehouse TV campaigns, claims it has received a growing number of email and phone enquiries since its inception.

The idea of a non-judgmental, honest and accessible information source was a good one; its execution, however, alienated some drug users.

"Someone I'm very close to rang Talk to Frank when they were having a panic attack after overdoing a few substances and booze," said one poster on the 'drugs' forum of urban75, a busy bulletin board based in Brixton, London. "Frank told them they were very stupid and that mixing drugs and alcohol can lead to brain damage and death. Really cool thing to say to someone who's having a panic attack."

Websites such as urban75 – which provide an online arena for people to gather to discuss drug effects, experiences and safety – are reporting growing numbers of people seeking advice on drugs.

On mephedrone alone, urban75, described in Parliament by Lib Dem MP

Martin Horwood as a "disconcertingly well-informed website", has fielded more than 120,000 page views and around 10,000 individual posts.

Urban75 is part of a huge site where users with names such as FridgeMagnet, Clint Iguana, Rollem and Kained&Able chat online about topics as wide-ranging as computer technology, general gossip, cookery and gardening, philosophy and photography.

The site's founder and editor, Mike Slocombe, set up its static, harm reduction-focussed drug information pages in response to the death of Leah Betts on November 16, 1995. The teenager became a grim poster girl for her generation, dying after taking an ecstasy pill – and drinking seven pints of water in 90 minutes.

She panicked at a party at her parents' home after taking the drug, believing incorrect media reports that users of the drug should drink lots of water. Her death by water intoxication was a brutal illustration of the dangers of drug use – and inaccurate, or partially true public health information campaigns.

"Had she known what to do, she'd be alive today," Slocombe tells *Druglink*. "Leah Betts was the start of

it, we were trying to correct stuff the media was putting out. Some of it was counterproductive, preposterous scare stories."

The site's drug information pages, where detailed information is offered on many substances, are hugely popular, with over 60,000 unique page views in December 2009 alone, as drug users worldwide sought information on substances such as GBL, amphetamines, ecstasy, LSD and cannabis.

Users can also post messages in threads that develop into often-complex online discussions. "People are going to do drugs no matter what the government think," says Slocombe. "On urban75, we give honest advice, like an older brother who's been there, done that. And we don't deny that drugs can be great fun as well."

It's this approach that Slocombe says sets the site apart from official services.

"Talk To Frank does its thing, but it's hamstrung by the fact it's funded by the government, there's things they can't say. Look at the Professor David Nutt case: an argument was made for reclassification of cannabis and Ecstasy based on the harm they cause, and he was ignored.

"Politically, it's suicide for any politician to rally for the cause of

declassification, or decriminalisation. We'll never get a full and frank discussion about drugs in the UK; politically it's too hot. Even on a local level, look at Brian Paddick [ex police chief of Lambeth, south London]. He realised that locals cared about crack and smack more than pot, tried to change things, and he got burnt, too."

Urban75 does not allow users to ask where they can get drugs, and at times intervenes if the moderators feel threads are harmful. In 2007, several posters were evangelising on the benefits of ketamine, says Slocombe. The site's moderators had a meeting and decided to intervene.

Slocombe rejects arguments that the site popularises drug use, especially around the growth in use of mephedrone, where news of the now massively popular legal high first broke cover.

"If urban75 did not exist, mephedrone would be no more or less popular. And at least people could find balanced, honest opinion and background on it. Also, we banned any sourcing discussions, even though it was legal," he says.

Deeper down in the virtual world of drugs information lie Erowid and Bluelight. Erowid is a vast, searchable database that documents users' drug experiences, including dosage, effects – both positive and negative – and safety information.

One of Erowid's founders, Fire (a pseudonym) set the site up in the US in 1994 as she and her partner were interested in both web design and psychoactives, and so used their own archive of drug information as the basis for a simple website.

"Relatively quickly it became apparent that there was a lot of need for this type of information and a lot of people who knew the answers to other people's questions about recreational drugs. We could help get accurate information out," she says.

The site works, and has saved lives. "We receive on average two messages a week from people who explicitly tell us: 'Erowid saved my life,'" says Fire.

A recent example proves her case. "Late last year, there was a batch of a research chemical called Bromo-Dragonfly that was mislabeled and sold online as 2C-B-Fly, a related but much less potent chemical. Several people died as a result of this mislabeling. News of these deaths was quickly disseminated through Erowid and other boards such as Bluelight.

"We were then contacted by an individual who said that he had ingested material from a batch of 2C-B-Fly and

had started having a difficult time. He looked up information online and came across the Erowid warning messages. He then joined Bluelight, received additional warning and ended up getting himself to the hospital. In the end he was all right. We received several other messages from people who said they had also received the mislabeled batch and had thrown the material away after reading Erowid."

The site gets 12 million visitors a year, about 45 per cent of whom are aged 18-22, 16 per cent or so are high school aged (15-17), and another 16 per cent are aged 23-29. Submissions are posted anonymously, and Erowid takes technical steps to ensure users' identity is protected.

ON URBAN75, WE GIVE HONEST ADVICE, LIKE AN OLDER BROTHER WHO'S BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

Fire's motivation is the same as Slocombe's: to interject with honest, functional advice – an alternative to the politicised, official line.

"The political pressures of the war on drugs tend to create a lot of bad data, and we believe that accuracy and integrity in publishing information about psychoactives will lead to healthier and more balanced choices and behaviours," she says.

Bluelight is a stranger beast altogether. Some of its sections flirt with a more anarchic and wild approach to drug taking, while other sub-fora are mindbendingly technical and geeked-out. Its ethos is harm reduction, and it pursues this aim by hosting informed, non-judgmental discussions.

Many posters share their encyclopedic, often professional or academic knowledge freely, collaborating to advance knowledge of harmful combinations of drugs, or dangerous metabolic processes that the body exerts on drugs. Meanwhile, expertise is also drawn upon to advance knowledge of what combinations of drugs lead to better or more intense experiences.

One poster there, known as Vecktor, has identified a possible metabolite of mephedrone which they say is cardiotoxic, and fears it will have health impacts on users for many years to come.

A Bluelight moderator, Kevin, offers an unflinching analysis of why people take drugs. "All drug use is for the most part an expression of self-destruction," he says.

He's also clear on why official services can only ever fail to achieve their goals.

"Bluelight gets the information across in a more credible way. The Frank ads are a joke. It has a very authoritarian stance. They present the information in a way that claims there's no other truth than what they say. People don't accept that these days. Frank attempts to be funny, and it doesn't come off as real, it just seems forced. People don't take Frank seriously, it's the official tone that's the problem," he says.

But a Talk to Frank spokesperson says the site has been successful in striking a chord with young drug users. "Independent research shows that 81 per cent of 11-18 year olds trust the site to provide them with balanced, reliable information. Interactions with Frank continue to grow each year and young people tell us that they value the help that Frank provides."

Bluelight's sister site, Pillreports, is a searchable database of tablets sold worldwide as ecstasy. Fred, a 30-year-old London-based artist, told *Druglink* he uses the site to make sure his dealer is selling genuine MDMA tablets, rather than the inferior piperazines that have predominated in the UK black market for over a year.

"Before seeing Pillreports, I never knew what a Marquis reagent test was. Now, I use the test kit [which uses drops of a chemical that turns black on contact with MDMA] on all pills. If the reagent doesn't go black, then I throw them away – or don't buy them."

Twenty years after the rise of Acid House demonstrated that an entire generation of young people were enthusiastically ignoring government advice and consuming drugs in unprecedented quantities, a growing supply of harm reduction advice is now available.

Sites like Urban75, Erowid and Bluelight are not the only credible alternatives to Talk to Frank. Several drug charities, such as Release, Addaction and DrugScope have their own well-read and independent information sources, which aim to inform users – and other interested parties – without condemning them.

It may not be politically palatable, but today, drug users know more about their topic than the government, and to many people, alternative sites seem better equipped to handle health problems than official helplines.

As with many complex issues, the more information we have, and the more sources of advice can be tapped into and weighed-up, the better informed we can be.