

Teenage kicks

How did the isolated County Durham village of Cockfield kick off a nationwide panic over legal highs? Max Daly investigates

In the vast, thinly populated landscape that dominates the peaceful district of Teesdale in south west County Durham, lies the old mining village of Cockfield. It has a primary school, a village hall, a few shops, two pubs, the obligatory Chinese take-away and a working men's club on its last legs. At the risk of offending the villagers of Low Wham to the north and Staindrop to the south, Cockfield is pretty much in the middle of nowhere.

There's not a lot for teenagers to do: one of the most popular hang-outs is outside the local Co-Op. Buses run infrequently to the nearby towns of Bishop Auckland and Barnard Castle, while a bus to the larger town of Darlington is a three hour round-trip.

It's probably safe to say that few people outside Teesdale, which lists tractor and quad bike thefts as its most taxing crimes, would have heard of Cockfield. But that was before the village found itself the unlikely focal point of a national drug panic around the cocaine-ecstasy style legal high, mephedrone.

"We have seen five young local people admitted to hospital in recent weeks after taking mephedrone," Inspector Kevin Tuck of Durham Police, told local newspaper reporters in November. "One person in Cockfield took 36 hours to come down from his high."

Police warned that anyone found with a bag of suspicious white powder could be arrested, taken to a cell and have their DNA and fingerprints taken. Cockfield was identified by police as being the source of the spread of mephedrone use in Teesdale.

Fuelled by reports that mephedrone may have caused the death of 14-year-old schoolgirl Gabrielle Price at a Brighton house party, the BBC and Sky News descended on Teesdale to broadcast live on how the 'mephedrone menace' had come from nowhere to grip youngsters in the area. Home Secretary Alan



Caught in the Net: the isolated old mining village of Cockfield had mephedrone on tap because it is bought on the web

Johnson was quizzed in the House of Commons by MPs eager to find out what the drug was and how soon it could be banned. Johnson reminded them that the government's drug advisory body, the ACMD, was preparing a report on mephedrone that is due out soon.

Over the next fortnight, police, NHS and drug services around rural Britain – from Sussex and Hampshire to Shrewsbury, Burnley, Barnsley and deepest Scotland – declared that they too had young people getting into trouble with mephedrone.

One boarding school in Kent suspended three sixth form students after they arranged a shipment of mephedrone to be delivered to their dorms before handing it out at a party in a nearby village.

As *Druglink* exclusively reported in March last year, the drug, disguised

by vendors as 'plant food' in order to circumvent trade and medicine laws, has generated big interest on 'underground' internet bulletin boards and among urban middle class dabblers because it is cheaper and easier to buy than street cocaine or ecstasy.

But mephedrone's legality, easy availability and low cost – at around £14 a gram – makes it an attractive option to bored teenagers looking for kicks in rural Britain. And it was bored teenagers with a 'kids let loose in a sweetshop' opportunity to get as out of it as possible who were the most likely mephedrone buyers to pop up on the police radar.

"They started getting off their heads on this new drug they were calling 'drone' in the summer," says Julie [not her real name], the mother of the teenager from Cockfield whose hospital visit and '36-hour high' had become national news. She decided to talk exclusively to *Druglink* after being shocked that a legal drug could have such a powerful effect on her son. Julie describes her son as a popular boy who has been a risk-taker and 'hyper' since childhood.

"Lee [not his real name] and some of his mates started taking it at the weekends. Then they were on it every day, snorting or swallowing it, usually with alcohol in one of their bedrooms. I could tell they were taking it because it's got a horrible smell, like one of those sickly sweet air fresheners."

Julie says that Lee, who is unemployed but earns cash grouse beating during the shooting season, started looking really unhealthy and drawn. He didn't eat properly and he was taking valium to deal with the comedowns. "They were saying it's legal, and I was saying it can't be if it's doing this to you," says Julie.

One Thursday in July, according to his mother, Lee and four mates received a bulk delivery of mephedrone that kick-started a five-day drugs and drinking

marathon. "Five days later, early in the morning, I saw Lee swirling around with his arms stretched out, in the fields outside my house," she says.

"He saw my car and hid in a bunch of stinging nettles. I asked him what he was doing there and he said he was looking for drugs. I told him he looked like a smackhead and he got really angry. He said he was going to kill himself, his eyes were far back in his sockets. My older son tried catching him, but he kept running off and hiding in bushes.

"It's the scariest thing I've ever seen in my life. I wanted to get him sectioned, it was the only thing I could think of, so I called 999," says Julie.

One of the two police officers who managed to bundle Lee into an ambulance, remembers: "He was shouting gibberish, it seemed like he had severe mental health problems, I've never seen anything like that before."

He was taken to hospital, but because he was continually abusive to staff, was driven to Bishop Auckland police station

where he was put in a cell. The footage of Lee's 90 minutes in cell 9 is like watching a cruel animal experiment. Looking more like a scrawny 14 year old than a 19-year-old, Lee is not still for a second.

He writhes and twitches around and his body contorts into strange positions. It looks like he is becoming increasingly paranoid – not surprising for someone locked in a small room with large amounts of stimulants coursing through his system. The man locked in the cell next door at the time later told police he could hear a high-pitched screaming coming from Lee's cell. It looks like he is enduring hell. Lee was examined by a police doctor and taken back to hospital, where he tested positive for mephedrone and was given sedatives.

"The next morning I went to pick him up," says Julie. "He was still high and very agitated, pulling his drips out. He couldn't really walk. When I got him home his 11-year-old sister was so terrified because of the state he was in she ran out the house."

It was after four more young people were taken to hospital after using mephedrone – the final straw was a teenage boy taken to A&E after his heart rate rose to 170bpm – that police, along with the area's drug services, decided to issue a press release warning of the dangers of the legal high.

"It might not be a police problem because it's legal, but it's a public safety issue, and it's our duty to protect the public, so that's why we got involved," says Sgt Michael Urwin, as we drive around Cockfield's deserted streets. "So we got together with drug workers and colleagues in primary care and said 'we are not having this'. It's causing significant amounts of harm for everyone to sit up and take notice."

We pass the Co-Op, where Lee and a small gang of boys like to stand outside causing minor nuisances. "Recently the local council tried playing classical music through speakers outside the shop to try and scare the group away. But they just ended up whistling Mozart all day," says



China crisis: Sgt Mike Urwin holding a bag of the research chemical that has proved so popular with Teesdale teenagers

Sgt Urwin. "There's not a lot for kids to do round here," he says. "They tried opening a youth club, but it just didn't work, not everyone was interested. Most kids stay home and play computer games."

He says before Lee was arrested, no-one in Teesdale had ever heard of mephedrone. "New drug trends are something I would expect to start in an inner city, so it took us by surprise that we had one in our midst," he says. "In most cases, we are seeing the drug being taken with alcohol, but also with cocaine, speed, ecstasy and ketamine."

"We started looking into mephedrone on the internet and were surprised to see it was legal. We found sites selling it, discussion boards and that it was being sent by first class mail to people's doorsteps. There was an attitude among young people that we couldn't touch them because they were doing nothing against the law."

The legality of the drug is throwing up new dilemmas for police. They know in which pubs mephedrone is being sold and snorted – in one, staff have been offered lines by customers – yet they are powerless to do anything about it.

What is more, people they arrest in possession of white powder are demanding it back once it has been tested by forensics, on the basis that it is legally purchased property. In response, Durham Constabulary solicitors have drawn up disclaimer forms which suspects are asked to sign to waive their right to have seized mephedrone returned to them.

Sgt Urwin said the use of mephedrone, ironically for the police, may have been brought about by police tightening the screws on Teesdale's already limited cocaine dealing network.

"From what we can gather, it started from one lad in Cockfield watching a BBC3 documentary about legal highs. He's gone on the internet and bought some mephedrone. Then he bought in bulk, sold to his mates in the village and from there it traveled to the neighbouring village of Evenwood, then onto the towns of Barnard Castle, Bishop Auckland and eventually Darlington.

"I think it's a case of an enterprising, if that's the right word, teenager who thought 'how can I get round this lack of cocaine'." Sgt Urwin says it is not coincidence that most people who are caught with mephedrone are known past



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users of cocaine. "Oddly, it was because of the close knit communities around here that it spread so quickly, but also the close knit thing was maybe why we identified the problem quicker than other parts of the country."

Tracy Blandford, chief executive of YMCA Barnard Castle, which provides a drop-in centre for local teenagers, says mephedrone's legal status means it holds less fear for young people than other drugs do. "I don't think they think that because it's legal it will create less risks to their health. They are not thinking about their safety, they are thinking about getting in less trouble with parents and police. There's very much a vibe among young people that adults can't do anything about it," says Blandford.

Unlike most drugs, Blandford points out, mephedrone was something that children knew far more about than adults. "I think sometimes adults are scared of talking about a new drug for fear it will alert young people to it. But in this case young people have been talking about mephedrone since the summer.

But why the Teesdale area? "Mephedrone really seems to have stuck in this town. Users are not reliant on an underground chain of supply and it's very easy for young people to get hold of and to sell it to their friends. Everyone knows everyone, so mephedrone got passed around very quickly.

"Most teenagers will, even if they haven't taken it themselves, know where to get mephedrone from here. There is a big weekend alcohol culture here and mephedrone is very much mixed in with that. It's a very rural thing – out on the green spaces getting drunk."

Police forces looking for a way of tackling legal highs ahead of any changes to the Misuse of Drugs Act are keeping a keen eye on a case currently playing out at Isle of Wight magistrates court. In December, Martin Smith, a 49-year-old man from Newport became the first person in the country to be charged with selling a legal high, in this case the product Space E, believed to contain mephedrone. Smith, who runs a head shop in Newport, was charged with two offences under 'General Product Safety Regulations 2005' and one offence under 'Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008'. The laws cover issues around whether products are safe for human consumption. Smith's case was due for a preliminary hearing at court on January 12 as *Druglink* went to press.

The message to stay away from mephedrone appears to have hit home in the area's 'legal high' head shops. Upstairs in Pipe Dreams, located in an alley off Bishop Auckland's high street, an array of packages containing legal highs such as pep pills, salvia, Snow Blow, Diablo and Blow Out lie behind a glass cabinet. The vampy looking shop assistant wearing a vast array of facial piercings said they did not stock mephedrone. "It's causing a lot of problems with my friends, young boys I know are getting ill. People are coming into the shop saying it's too much."

Although Lee spent a week recovering from his high profile mephedrone binge shut away in a bedroom at his mother's house in Cockfield, Julie says it hasn't scared him off. "I got him some food because he hadn't eaten for days. He stayed in his bedroom for a week. He posted on Facebook saying he would never take it again. But after a week he was back on it. In fact he was on it all through last weekend.

"In the village I can see lots of kids taking it, even the really academic girls you don't expect. But if it becomes illegal there will always be something else. Anyway, they'll still carry on buying and using it – cocaine's illegal and they still do that." ■