

Do you trust the Dark Side?

Online drug discussion forums such as Bluelight offer free advice for people who are struggling with drug problems. But, says John Bagshaw, can this advice be trusted?

The internet has revolutionized many aspects of our lives and drugs are no different. Drug users are not only using the web to buy drugs, they are also firing up their laptops in order to get relevant information. There are now a number of sites that specialise in discussion about various aspects of drug use, from heroin treatment and the nature of addiction to complex chemistry and the latest legal high brands.

One of these sites is Bluelight. In one forum its members will be dissecting the latest media news, while in another they may be discussing the chemical structure of a brand new psychoactive substance. What has attracted most attention from outsiders is Bluelight's function as a place to share drug-taking experiences and for psychonauts to document, in public, the effects drugs have on their minds and bodies. Members openly discuss the fun that drugs can bring, complete with guides on how to use drugs safely.

There is a lesser-known section of the site, called The Dark Side, where advice and experiences are shared. It deals with complex issues such as addiction and the psychological problems caused by drug use. But to some observers, it is this part of the site that is beyond the pale, especially because some people posting on the site are in such a delicate, and possibly life threatening, state of mind.

"The Dark Side part of this site is dangerous," says Dr Sameer Jain, a surgeon based in Leeds who has experience of working with addicts. "There is nothing more dangerous than people with these problems offering advice...of any sorts." Dr Jain compares

it with a recent failed attempt by NHS services to set up an online and physical community where severely depressed patients would meet for discussion in an attempt to relieve suicidal ideation. "What actually ended up happening was the sharing of ideas on how to commit suicide in an unmediated forum. Unsurprisingly, suicide rates rose shortly after the schemes introduction."

But is this an unfair comparison? Bluelight is not a free-for-all, says Alasdair Manson, the site's Director of Public Relations. He says Bluelight's team of moderators have in the past been quick to close down posts where people are seeking advice on suicide. Moderators refer such members to their nearest crisis centre, he adds.

Looking at The Dark Side forum you get a sense that people are genuinely concerned when their fellow posters need help. Often the community will repeatedly ask for the original poster to keep in contact if they seem to be at risk of harming themselves.

In contrast, a thread asking how to quit crack was answered with a fairly uninspired, 'hopefully you'll learn to hate it' and in one thread discussing how to taper alcoholism, one solution proffered was to use more alcohol. However, there were far more sensible suggestions handed out to people seeking advice on quitting and the negative effects of drug use. But even so, these are amateur drug counselors, and someone has to take charge if the advice becomes unhelpful, or if a discussion heads towards mayhem. So who monitors The Dark Side?

"In the specific case of The Dark Side

forum, criteria for selection includes, but is not limited to: ability to devote time daily to forum duties, integrity, compassion; consistency and positivity,' says Manson. There is no mention of a desire for people to be abstinent: being a former or even current drug user would aid your chance of becoming a moderator.

"Generally speaking, when a moderator vacancy opens on Bluelight, candidates are invited to apply for the position in a Staff Vacancy thread in the forum," says Manson. "There will be a short period of private discussion. If a clear candidate emerges from that discussion then great. If not, a vote may ultimately select the successful candidate". The final decision to make the appointment is taken by a senior member of the site.

Some Bluelight moderators have personal experience of the damage that addiction can cause. One moderator on the site, who goes by the name of Herbavore, spends her time exclusively monitoring and posting on The Dark Side, advising people on the edge, with no clinical or professional training. In her 60s, she lost her son, a former Bluelight poster, to a drugs overdose in 2011 when he was 20 years old.

Is she the best person to advise others? "Being on Bluelight has replaced painting at this point in my life and that is OK with me," she says. "This is the way I live my life: I give myself fully to whatever feels right at the time. I've learned that is the healthiest way to live."

An addiction specialist with a successful practice in west London is concerned about the moderator



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issue. "I am unable to find any details on moderator's credentials and qualifications". He thinks that Bluelight moderators should have at least a medical degree in order to offer advice to people who are experiencing difficulties with addiction and mental health.

Yet are the motives of those who say professionals are the only people qualified to give advice on addiction matters as altruistic as they at first appear? Rehabilitation is a big business: the US addiction treatment industry is mostly privately funded and expected to have revenues of \$34bn by 2014.

Bluelight isn't a commercial operation. It's a community of people that seems intent on looking after each other, free of charge. You can post about the delightful time you had on 2CB, or you can reveal that a benzodiazepine problem is destroying your life. In each case, you'll have someone respond with a degree of insight. It may not come from someone with a medical degree but given the moderator checks, it will at least be someone with some understanding your dilemma or experience.

Bluelight provides tips on how to use drugs safely. It doesn't allow people to post sources of drugs or even discuss prices, although there are sites that do. *Daily Mail* readers might be outraged by a step-by-step guide to injecting

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heroin safely, but harm reduction is the underlying ethos of the site. This means for example, allowing a discussion on how to inject subutex, a heroin substitute, by getting rid of the fillers put into the pills so you can inject the medication 'safely'. Other threads discuss the use of buprenorphine as a recreational drug. One poster has provided a guide on how to extract pure codeine from co-codamol. This method of use may cause someone less damage to their liver rather than swallowing the pills, which contain high levels of paracetamol, but is this carrying the virtues of harm reduction too far?

The site's bosses are quick to deny allegations that it is promoting drug use. "I'd reject that claim absolutely," says Manson. 'Standards vary from forum to forum, but threads promoting substance

abuse are simply not tolerated."

From its humble beginnings as a message board about MDMA in 1997, Bluelight has grown from to a thriving community with over 200,000 members and nearly 5,000,000 posts in 225,000 threads. The site, thought to have a Russian domain name, bluelight.ru, for legal reasons, has two owners, one engineer, five administrators, nine senior moderators and over 80 forum moderators. All of them are volunteers.

Sites such as Bluelight are not going away any time soon. They are part of a larger online revolution in the world of drugs; from buying and selling on Silk Road, to new products tried and tested by psychonauts, to advice given by drug users themselves. Users of its forums see it as an invaluable sounding board – a far more interactive way of learning and discussing drug issues than the government's own drug information site, Talk to Frank.

Although Bluelight is perhaps a rare example of altruism in an avaricious world, users of the site must be made aware that it is a resource that is far from infallible, and one that is best used in conjunction with more professional, regulated services that can be held to account.

■ **John Bagshaw** is a freelance journalist