

need for enhanced national support, a means for exchanging experiences in good practice and the need for training and materials.

Despite these recommendations and the efforts of several agencies, there are still precious few organisations in the UK offering specific services for solvent users. Not many more have staff who profess to expertise in this area.

First sniff – last sniff

Yet volatile substance abuse isn't like smoking cannabis, dropping acid or getting drunk, it's as dangerous as injecting heroin. Every year volatile substance abuse kills eight-times more people than ecstasy.

It is widely recognised that solvent sniffing is dangerous each and every time. Users could die on the five hundredth use or the first. In the latest report from St George's, for 27 of the 73 deaths in 1997 there was no previous history of their having used before their fatal occasion. For this reason, above all others, we welcome the change in legislation that hopes to restrict the availability of gas lighter refills to young people.

It will be important to monitor the impact that this change, its introduction and enforcement, has on the use of lighter refills by young people as well as the use of other aerosols, solvents and other volatile substances. One thing is certain, this isn't a panacea. No one believes that legislation alone is the answer. Only a range of responses will deliver the kind of comprehensive solutions needed.

On 16 September 1999 the tabloid newspapers carried the story of Phillip Mather who died after sniffing aerosol deodorant.

Phillip did not fit the image of a disadvantaged youth sniffing solvents to get a brief high in an empty life. He was described as a 'brilliant student' (*The Mirror*) and 'Boy genius' (*The Sun*), he had 13 grade A GCSEs, was deputy head boy at his school, and was aiming to study computer science at Cambridge University.

It is believed that he died as a result of his first experience of solvent sniffing. His mother was quoted as saying: 'He did something stupid for the first time in his life and now he is not here.'

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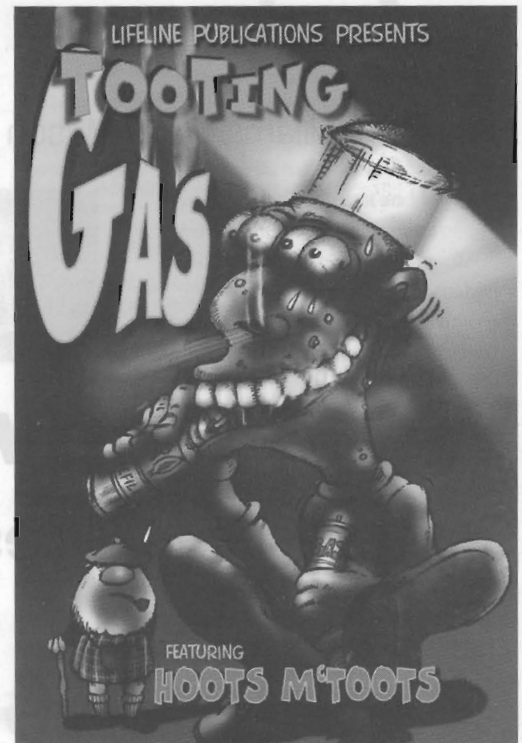
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1. Advisory
Council on the
Misuse of Drugs.
Volatile Substance
Abuse. London:
ACMD, 1995.



The deliberate inhalation of volatile substances is a continuing, unpredictable and easily ignored issue, needing and deserving more attention

Solvent services

In the last few years a number of drug services have been developed that seek early intervention in drug using careers. They aim to deliver specific, sensitive services to young people. Many who use solvents are in this younger age group, so workers in these services will find volatile substance abuse common in their client group.

Placing the dangers of sniffing

solvents within a context of wider substance use and risk taking behaviour are everyday events. Strategies to reduce the harm solvent sniffing causes are discussed with clients. Yet how many workers in these services feel that they have adequate support and access to the right resources for this client group?

For older and longer term users of volatile substances the picture is even more vague. The preconception that solvent misuse is 'kids' stuff' is frequently shared by those users who are brave enough to seek help. These users often have complex needs and rarely fit the profile of a typical community drug team client. Again, the level of resources, support and referral routes for these isolated yet persistent clients is poor.

It is clear that the recommendations in the ACMD report have not been effectively implemented. There is still no national, regional and, in many cases local, co-ordinated strategy or effective range of responses. But, these recommendations still offer the best chance of delivering what volatile substance abusers need ■

Lifeline Solvent Resource Group

In 1998 the Solvent Abuse Resource Group (SRG) joined forces with Lifeline to form Lifeline Solvent Resource Group (LSRG). LSRG offers a range of specialist services locally, regionally and nationally, for users and their families as well as training and support for professionals and voluntary agencies.

Work with other agencies across the UK resulted in a network of solvent abuse agencies – Network VSA.

The National Freephone Helpline for VSA, run by Re-Solv, is 0800 800 2345.

Lifeline Solvent Resource Group has helped to produce information to support those concerned about VSA, and with Richard Ives and Network VSA published *Target Groups and Key Messages*, distributed to all Drug Action Teams early in 1998.

Lifeline Solvent Resource Group has published *Tooting Gas*, a leaflet for young people who are starting to experiment with volatile substance abuse or who are already users of gas and solvents.

Richard Ives and Lifeline Solvent Resource Group are producing a leaflet to provide similarly realistic and practical information to concerned adults.

Tooting Gas is available from Lifeline Publications, 101-103 Oldham Street, Manchester M4 1LW, phone 0161 839 2075, fax 0161 834 5903, email: publications@lifeline.org.uk website: www.lifeline.demon.co.uk

Lifeline Solvent Abuse Resource Group can be contacted on 01254 677493

Re-Solv have a new retail-staff training video *A Loaded Gun* available from Re-Solv, 30a High Street, Stone, Staffordshire ST15 8AW, phone 01785 817885, fax 01785 813205.

