



# Tricks of the trade

Few TV hoaxes have been as successful as Brass Eye's notorious 'Cake' drug stunt. The latest drug myth doing the rounds is child-friendly, strawberry-flavoured crystal meth. **Sam Hart** on why people are so readily taken in by tall drug tales.

In 1997 Noel Edmonds added neuroscience to his already impressive list of achievements. The TV presenter helpfully pinpointed a little known area of the brain whilst warning against the dangers of an evil new street drug called 'Cake' on national television.

"Cake," Edmonds gravely informed millions of viewers, "has an active ingredient that stimulates the part of the brain known as Shatner's Bassoon. That's the bit that deals with time perception, so a second feels like a month. Almost sounds like fun – unless you're the Prague schoolboy who walked out in front of a tram. He thought he had a month to cross the street."

Edmonds was not alone in his fervent condemnation of the drug. A disgusted Bernard Manning told us that: "If you're sick on this stuff, you can puke yourself to death. One girl threw up her own pelvis. What a fucking disgrace."

And David Amess, MP, asked questions about the drug – also known as "Joss Ackland's Spunky Backpack" and "Chronic Basildon Donut" – in parliament, prompting the Home Office to announce that they were considering a ban.

The trio of celebrities, and indeed many MPs, were victims of a high profile hoax orchestrated by satirist Chris Morris. Their denunciation of the drug was broadcast to the nation on Channel 4's Brass Eye. They were not, of course, the first people

to fall victim to a drugs hoax. False information about drugs has been circulating on a fairly regular basis since the 1960s, when popular folklore decreed that smoking dried banana skins provided a legal high.

However, the Cake debacle was unusual in that it was short-lived, high-profile and hugely implausible. In reality, drug hoaxes tend to rumble on for years, and contain at least a small element of truth. But, like Cake, they are fuelled by the public perception that drug dealers are lurking at every school gate and are, mysteriously, more interested in poisoning school children for their pocket money than earning serious cash by selling drugs to adults.

The most recent scare story concerns Strawberry Quick – pink, strawberry-flavoured methamphetamine which is allegedly being handed out in school playgrounds like dolly mixtures – by dealers anxious to corner the extreme youth market. The email, which originates in the States, claims that the drug, which looks like the children's sweets can "hospitalise" children. The email is accompanied by a picture of some suspiciously luminous crystals crammed into a cellophane bag. All very interesting apart from the fact that, as US and UK police have confirmed, the drug has failed so far to exist.



The Strawberry Quick story has been dropping into inboxes since early last year. But it has a long way to go to beat the longevity of the 'Blue Star' hoax, which began circulation in the early 1980s and has bubbled to the surface in various parts of the world ever since – despite police departments' weary attempts to squash it. The story goes that LSD-soaked tattoos were being distributed to school children in an attempt to recruit an ever-younger generation of drug users. Originally the tabs were said to be daubed with blue stars, which over the years have evolved to Mickey Mouse, Superman, Bart Simpson and other cartoon characters. The warning goes that children can experience fatal trips, simply by handling the tabs – as the acid can be absorbed through the skin.

The stories are largely perpetuated by well-meaning parents, teachers and community leaders who feel it is 'better to be safe than sorry', while the media, in true puppy-dog form, is always eager to jump on the bandwagon. Respected organisations such as the Scouts, schools and health organisations have all been duped into spreading the word.

At first glance, dealers pushing drugs that taste like sweets may seem plausible – after all, drinks manufacturers follow a similar principle with alcopops. And some experts believe that the Strawberry Quick story may have its origin in the fact that crystal meth is sometimes coloured a pale pink as part of the manufacturing process. However, there is little hard evidence of pushers deliberately targeting small children in the hope that they will splurge their pocket money on more LSD as soon as they get out of custody. And the police and drug agencies have repeatedly pointed to the lack of truth in the stories and even believe that they could be detrimental – detracting from real problems.

## The media-fuelled belief that dealers are 'evil' and prey on innocent 'victims' conveniently masks the truth that drug use is complex and rooted in society's problems

But the fact that the rumours are unfounded has not stopped the most vigilant anti-drugs warriors from attempting to legislate against them. The Saving Kids from Dangerous Drugs Act proposed by Californian Senator Dianne Feinstein calls for double mandatory prison terms for anyone who "manufactures, creates, distributes or possesses with intent to distribute a controlled substance that is flavored, colored, packaged or otherwise altered in a way that is designed to make it more appealing to a person under 21 years of age, or who attempts or conspires to do so."

And New Zealand politician and fervent anti-drugs campaigner Jacqui Dean was duped into calling for a ban on water. The myth surrounding the dangers of Dihydrogen Monoxide (an unfamiliar scientific name for water) was created by Californian students in 1989 and taken one step further by hoaxer Michael Earley, who wrote to Ms Dean, posing as a concerned citizen.

"I...call for you to ban Dihydrogen Monoxide," he wrote "In many cases of drug/party pill overdoses reported in New Zealand and overseas, Dihydrogen Monoxide is considered to be one of the contributing factors, and as such, should be classed in the Misuse of Drugs Act. That anybody is able to obtain ten litres of something as potentially dangerous as di-hydrogen monoxide, legally, is proof that the current

**Red peril: strawberry quick, an email-based scare story has been confirmed by US and UK police to be a hoax**



government is doing nothing to solve this binge culture and that in fact the statistics have got worse as the years go by."

Earley concluded by demanding: "I look forward to your reply and ask you to take strong action."

Dean duly wrote to a health minister asking for his view on outlawing the substance. The minister replied: "Thanks for your letter calling for a ban on Dihydrogen Monoxide. Dihydrogen Monoxide is water. Yours sincerely..."

So why are so many people ready to believe such claims on the basis of so little evidence? Some drug academics believe that drug myths tap into the moral majority's hysterical fears about drug dealers. The media-fuelled belief that dealers are 'evil' and prey on innocent 'victims' conveniently masks the truth that drug use is complex and rooted in society's problems.

"Editors and readers alike feel more comfortable believing that the worsening horrors of our inner cities are caused by evil individuals from a different gene pool – addicts," write Craig Reinerman and Ceres Duskin in their article *Dominant Ideology and Drugs in the Media* in the international journal on Drugs Policy, 1992.

Consequently, stories about crazed junkies, drug epidemics sweeping the country and new, ever more virulent substances that can 'bring on early signs of schizophrenia from the first puff' are rife in the media.

This demonisation of drug users and dealers is not new. "All the lines of attack we still see today in the media were in place before 1914," says Harry Shapiro in his book on drugs and Hollywood, *Shooting Stars*. "The public wanted heroes and villains, they wanted scapegoats, people to blame for everything that went wrong in their lives, they wanted sex, depravity, mystery and murder. [Press baron William Randolph] Hearst quickly realized that drug stories could provide the lot."

"The game plan was to take some kernels of truth around the undeniable dangers of drugs – the addictive potential of morphine or the anxiety and paranoia of chronic cocaine use – and magnify them through a prism of racism, nativism and fear."

One headline, 'Negro cocaine fiends are a new southern menace', based on the fact black slaves had been given cocaine against fatigue while working on southern plantations, sparked calls by local police for an upgrade in pistol power.

Not all stories relate to the substances themselves. The popular teenage sport of throwing trainers over a telephone wire has given rise to a drug lore of its own. The Mail on Sunday ran a story last year claiming that shoes dangling from a wire were a way for drug gangs to mark out their territory and to alert 'drug users looking for a fix that dealers were in the area.' Theories flying around chat forums even suggest that different trainers are an indication of which gang you are in.

But the theory has received little backing from official channels. Fears over the 'drug trainer' story in Stockton were allayed by a councillor who told the local paper: "We do not believe that a pair of shoes over a telephone cable is a sign a drug dealer lives nearby. It's more likely to be a sign that some idiot has thrown their shoes away."

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