

Vintage LSD scare sweeps UK

Mutant stickers laced with skin-permeable LSD joined Ninja Turtles in Britain's pre-Christmas fantasies, as an incredibly successful chain-letter-telex-fax scare persuaded parents and professionals that evil pushers were out to ensnare the innocent young.

Of unknown origin, the scare was spread in the main by well-intentioned professionals and members of the public acting on a 'better safe than sorry' basis. Its core was the assertion that LSD-impregnated stickers were being given to children to stick on their skin for decoration, as a way of causing an LSD experience that would convert the youngsters into customers for the dealers.

Like 'Chinese whispers', it emerged in August with warnings that the stickers had been seen only in continental Europe. By November the story had gathered embellishments, including the claim that the stickers had already killed youngsters in Britain.

Along the way, the script was updated with "Turtle" and "Ghostbuster" stickers added to the "Blue Stars" and "Window Panes" of the earlier warnings.

The Home Office Forensic Science Service is Britain's main authority on the formulation of drugs on the illicit market. Dr Howard Stead of the Service says absorption of LSD through the skin simply by handling impregnated paper is most unlikely.

An effective dose might be ingested if the paper were repeatedly licked – as transfers often are – but only if there was an unusually large amount of LSD on the paper.

Despite this technical possibility, Dr Stead says that in the last year no new type of LSD products or high-dose version of an existing type have been seen in the UK, and there is no evidence now nor in the past of LSD being distributed on anything intended to be stuck to the skin.

The blue stars LSD story has been around for well over ten years. Dr Stead points out that some of the first paper square forms of LSD that appeared in the mid-70s were decorated with Disney characters and suggests it's possible that the scare developed as people mistook these to be intended as transfers or 'tattoos' aimed at children.

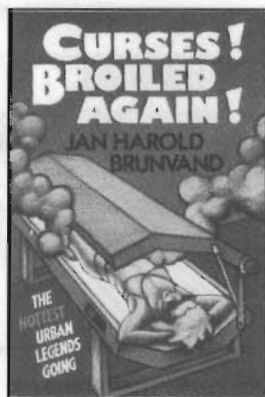
Detective Chief Superintendent Derek Todd of the Metropolitan

Police suspects that a similar misunderstanding may be happening today.

Alan Macfarlane, Chief Inspector at the Home Office Drugs Branch, queried why LSD dealers would need to waste relatively large amounts of the drug attempting to create future customers out of unwitting youngsters when they already had a "perfectly good market" for their wares.

By November police and Home Office officials were telling the press that the story was a hoax. But just as the panic was subsiding, a letter to the *Lancet* (8 December 1990) from a paediatrician working in Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight claimed that "drug-impregnated decorative stickers" had been seen at an acid house party on the island.

Dr Mucklow wrote that the story had been recounted to him by a "15-year-old boy with... behaviour difficulties" who hadn't handled the stickers. The rest of his letter repeats the warnings in the hoax circulars.



Just another urban legend – the book that documents the Blue Star LSD scare

Quizzed by *Druglink*, Dr Mucklow said there had earlier been two similar incidents on his patch involving children. In neither case had he seen the children concerned nor could he confirm that the alleged drug content of the objects had been ascertained by laboratory analysis.

In what is almost certainly a case of two and two put together to give five, Dr Mucklow says he saw the warning circulars before he spoke to the 15-year-old and then "started to think about things and search for what evidence there was". Despite the boy's "behavioural difficulties", Dr Mucklow

believes he really did see "some things similar" to the stickers described in the warnings – perhaps a case of LSD squares being mistaken for stickers.

One source of the scare appears to have been a warning issued to army personnel in Germany by the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR). At least by August they had warned the army in the UK that in Holland and Switzerland stickers "soaked" with LSD and strychnine were being given to children ostensibly to be stuck to the skin for decoration.

But the "ultimate" aim was to generate "dependency" and "new customers" for the illicit drugs market as the drugs were absorbed through the children's skin, potentially causing hallucinations and vomiting.

The army in Britain further disseminated the warning. A spokesperson said the warning from the BAOR originated last year in a real but isolated incident of a single "nutter" giving out drug-laced stickers in a playground in Germany near the Dutch border.

There must be considerable doubt over whether – even if this incident happened – it was the source of the current scare. The wording of many of the documents repeats warnings circulating in Canada in 1987. These too spoke of "Blue Star... tattoos" and other Disney-design "stamps" impregnated with LSD which could be absorbed through the skin.

As in the current scare, recipients were invited to broadcast the warning to their contacts. Then as now the chain letter technique was successful – what started with a single letter delivered to a local police department gathered into a "tempest" which forced Canadian police to issue a press release declaring the warnings a hoax (RCMP, October 1988).

In his book on urban legends (*Curses! Broiled Again!* Norton, 1989), Professor Brunvand of Utah University documents US "Blue Star acid" rumours couched in terms very similar to the current European version dating back to at least 1980. That year a New Jersey State Police bulletin warned that children may be attracted to "cartoon stamp" forms of LSD "believing it a tattoo transfer". But the bulletin went on to say that there was no evidence of any such cartoon actually circulating among children.

■ The Prison Medical Service will soon be distributing its *Caring for Drug Users* resource pack to help all prison staff deal with problem drug users. The pack is being piloted in women's prisons because of new evidence that these house a higher proportion of problem drug users than men's prisons. A large sample of the female prison population were interviewed by researchers from the Institute of Psychiatry who discovered that nearly a quarter were drug dependent at the time of their offence. Most were taking opiates and two-thirds were injecting.¹

1. Maden A. et al. *British Medical Journal*: 17 November 1990, p.1133.

■ Research on over 300 drug users in the North West of England found that the "chaotic lifestyle of the homeless or... heavy users" is associated with an elevated rate of sharing of injecting equipment.¹ Such injectors are unlikely to be able or organised enough to return home before withdrawal starts so more often rely on others to supply drugs and equipment. The authors believe the social dynamics of sharing make it difficult to refuse to make or accept an offer of drugs lest this imply the giver is HIV infected.

1. Klee H. et al. *AIDS Care* 1990, 2(2), p.133-145.

■ Toxicological analysis of all 103 foetal deaths reported to New York's Chief Medical Examiner in 1987-9 revealed traces of cocaine in 64 of the foetuses.¹ In several cases it seemed evident that cocaine use led to premature delivery which contributed to the deaths. Mothers of all but three of 64 cocaine-affected foetuses were either black or Hispanic. Seventy per cent of the deliveries were at home and just a quarter in hospital.

1. Morild I. et al. *Forensic Science International*: 1990, 47, p.181-9.

■ The spread of AIDS, substance abuse and other health and social problems in New York's rundown Bronx district is a result of the "systematic and continuing denial of municipal services" essential to the maintenance of community networks.¹ Using 'social geography' techniques, the researcher concludes that disruption of these networks leads to health and social pathologies which further disrupt the community.

1. Wallace R. *Social Science and Medicine*: 1990, 31(7), p.801-813.