

# World **Wired** Web

The powerful legal stimulant, mephedrone, has opened the door to a seemingly unstoppable virtual drugs market. **Mike Power**, the first journalist to report on mephedrone in *Druglink* last March, tracks its journey from Chinese labs to Britain's streets.

In May 2004, on an underground drug discussion group called 'The Hive', a chemist going by the online name of Kinetic posted the following message: 'I've been bored over the last couple of days and had a few fun reagents lying around, so I thought I'd try and make some 1-(4-methylphenyl)-2-methylaminopropanone hydrochloride, or 4-methylmethcathinone.'

He detailed how he had synthesised 4.8g of the drug in 48 hours – and then tried it. 'I could feel the rushes of energy coming across me, and after that, a fantastic sense of well-being that I haven't got from any drug before except my beloved Ecstasy,' he wrote.

Cut to 2010 and mephedrone, known as 'plant food', 'miaow' or 4-MMC, is now an increasingly popular recreational drug in the UK. Its use has been implicated, if not proven, in one death in the UK and several overseas and anyone can buy it, legally, for £10 a gram.

What was once the preserve of internet drug geeks has now hit the mainstream. The last time the world of 'research chemicals', another name for the world's lesser-known psychoactive compounds, hit the headlines was in 2004. The UK's Operation Ismene and its US counterpart Operation Web Tryp ended with the arrests of dozens of people who had bought illegal tryptamines and phenethylamines on US chemical sites. The FBI and British police seized details of credit card transactions for drugs and raided users homes.

However, in that case the chemical targeted was 2-CI, an illegal hallucinogenic. In the case of mephedrone, the drug is legal, so purchasers have committed no crime as the law currently stands.

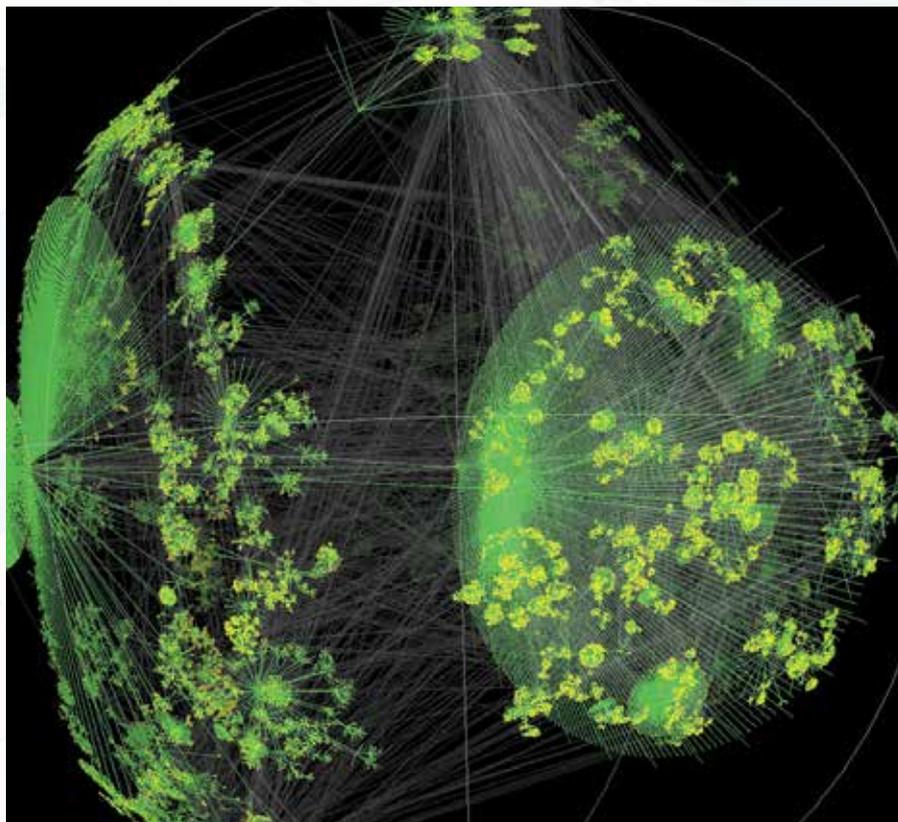
Although it is difficult to measure consumption or sales, the drug's

popularity has grown rapidly in a short period. Internet discussion boards, search engines and the national media have all played a role in sending mephedrone viral.

Its rise in the UK has coincided with an unprecedented scarcity of MDMA, following the seizure and destruction of 33 tonnes of sassafras oil in Cambodia in June 2008. At the time, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimated the oil could have been synthesised into approximately 245 million ecstasy pills. "If I could get proper,

good quality E, then there's no way I'd bother with meph," said one poster on an online discussion group.

John, a legal highs vendor who does not sell mephedrone, says the drug's growth in popularity, from a user's perspective, was predictable and understandable: "It's an effective stimulant, which is more than can be said for ecstasy and cocaine these days. And at around £10 a gram, it undercuts a great many of its illegal counterparts, while often being more effective, or at least more reliable. There is also the ease



of buying it from the comfort of your own home with a credit card, rather than handing over a fistful of crumpled notes to a drug dealer – and of course its legal status.”

However, it looks likely that mephedrone will be banned under the Misuse of Drugs Act before the summer. How that addition to the law is worded will have far-reaching impacts on the UK’s legal – and illegal – drug markets.

Mephedrone’s supply chain starts in China. Posing as a buyer, *Druglink* magazine found a Shanghai-based laboratory and emailed them asking how much 1kg of the drug would cost. ‘We can supply any quantity of mephedrone you require. It is of the best purity, and we have many people in England who buy from us’ emailed Eric, the laboratory’s sales manager. ‘It is crazy how much the English are buying. One kilogram can be sent to you by FedEx, we will mark it as sample so you do not have to pay tax. The cost is \$4,000,’

Eric also emailed *Druglink* several FedEx tracking numbers, which showed how the firm had sent dozens of kilo-weight packages from China via Charles De Gaulle airport in France, finally clearing customs at Stansted airport in the UK for eventual delivery all over Britain. The drug is then sold via websites at £10 a gram, with reductions for bulk purchases. The typical profit margin on a kilo is £7,500, with next-day delivery for retail customers via Royal Mail the most common option.

Less formal dealing networks have also sprung up. ‘I started using meph in January, buying it from a private email vendor whose address was given to me by an online friend,’ says one 20-year-old user who requested anonymity.

“Then I realised I could buy in bulk from China, get a lower price and sell it at a profit and still get my own for free. So I took the gamble, bought 500g for £1,500 from Shanghai, and sold it to friends at work at £15 a gram.

One London-based dealer, Tim, said: “Since all the stuff in the papers about meph it’s more of a money-spinner now than ever.” Some vendors are offering same-day delivery services by car or motorbike courier, charging premium prices. One firm offers a minimum five gram delivery service within 90 minutes to any address in London, 24 hours a day, at a cost of £95. Users have to sign a disclaimer that they will not consume the drug.

‘WE CAN SUPPLY ANY QUANTITY OF MEPHEDRONE YOU REQUIRE. IT IS OF THE BEST PURITY, AND WE HAVE MANY PEOPLE IN ENGLAND WHO BUY FROM US’

Some sites also offer sharp reductions for bulk purchases: prices of as little as £4 a gram are available, and with street dealers offering the drug at up to £20 a gram, profits of up to 400 per cent are possible. Despite high profile food health scares from China – including a tainted milk case that led to the execution of the chemists involved – UK-based mephedrone dealers have



flooded the market with hundreds of kilos of the drug, synthed in Chinese factories with safety standards often far short of European plants. Few dealers – if any – test it by any other means than taking it themselves.

In March 2009, when *Druglink* broke the story of mephedrone’s rising popularity, there were less than 10 online vendors of the drug. By June, as the drug became better known, Google’s advertising service for website owners, Adwords, was throwing up dozens of adverts for online stores, with new sites opening every week. Adwords is a service offered by the search engine to website owners looking to increase sales from their sites. Advertisers pay Google to appear alongside search results, paying Google a small fee for every click-through they receive.

In mid-December, with tabloid hysteria in full flow over the drug, dozens of mephedrone advertisers appeared on Google’s front page.

Whether through carelessness, subterfuge on the part of vendors who advertise it under a variety of names, or in its own search for profits, Google has been profiting from the trade in mephedrone. “We have strict policies about what ads we allow on our websites,” said a Google spokesman. “Under our drugs policy we do not allow ads for mephedrone. If we discover that ads are showing that break our policies, we will remove these as soon as possible.”

However, it is evident that Google does not consistently check the contents of advertisers’ websites. When *Druglink* contacted Google on December 14, a search for ‘4-MMC’ – mephedrone’s chemical name – bought

## Models of prohibition and control

In the US, the Federal Analogue Act defines compounds that are “substantially similar” in their chemical structure and effect on humans as ‘analogues’ and therefore illegal. This blanket legislation, whose wording is deliberately vague, leaves the court and lawyers to decide upon the interpretation of the words “substantially”.

This is distinct from the UK legislation under the Misuse of Drugs Act, which identifies those ‘like compounds’ via definitions set out in legislation, whether specific or generic, that captures each compound controlled. A drug law expert at the Home Office told *Druglink*: “This can make for highly effective legislation which is singularly dependant on forensic confirmation rather than judicial interpretation of a given drugs’ properties.”



up dozens of adverts for websites selling the drug. The same day, Google immediately took down the adverts. However, searching for 'plant food' or 'miaow' – the most common slang names for the drug – continued to prompt adverts driven by Adwords.

Online payment service PayPal, initially used by those buying mephedrone, says it does not now allow its customers to sell drugs and receive payments. "PayPal forbids the sale or purchase of all illegal drugs or any other substance or drug, including prescription drugs, which it believes to be harmful to consumers," said a spokesman. "Website owners must supply details of their services and links to sites before they can be approved as PayPal clients, so policing the products sold is a simple matter of looking at the links website owners provide."

As a result of the clampdown, online dealers of mephedrone started using Alertpay, an alternative internet payment system, and Western Union money and bank transfers.

An ironic side-effect of Google's lax monitoring of its advertisers has meant that some articles about mephedrone on newspaper sites such as *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* were accompanied by an automatically generated Google advert pointing readers towards sites where they could buy the drug. These were created by Google's AdSense programme, which scans subscribing newspapers' content for keywords and matches them with its Adwords advertisers.

"The Google ad for 'UK Strongest Legal Highs' [below the article] is a classic example of where the need for

*The Daily Telegraph* to make money seems to override the moral perspective," posted one reader on *The Daily Telegraph* site, commenting on a story that was followed by an automatically generated Google AdSense listing. "Has anyone seen the Google ads below? The irony is unbelievable," said another.

Since *Druglink* spoke to Google, it has removed listings generated by Adwords clients, and therefore AdSense listings on newspaper sites have also greatly diminished. However, Microsoft's Bing search engine and Yahoo also use a similar model to Adwords, and a search there for 'plant food' gives users a choice of several sites selling the drug. Social networking sites have also been used by dealers, with Facebook groups dedicated to the drug regularly featuring links to online shops. One Thailand-based vendor of research chemicals has set up a Twitter feed detailing the new legal and semi-legal compounds for sale.

## EVEN IF THE GOVERNMENT BANS MEPHEDRONE AND METHYLONE, THE RESEARCH CHEMICAL GENIE IS WELL AND TRULY OUT OF THE BOTTLE

It is this chaotic and rapidly-changing scenario that the Home Office must navigate. While mephedrone is illegal in the USA under vague, catch-all analogue laws that ban chemical compounds "substantially similar" to illegal substances, Britain is considering a ban on cathinones, the class of drugs to which mephedrone belongs.

"It is fundamental to the effectiveness of our legislation that we introduce durable legislation that not only deals with current trends but also foreseeable future ones," said a Home Office spokeswoman. "This approach will help ensure that we keep one step ahead of illicit manufacturers who have been shown to move to similar but non-controlled compounds when individual substances have been controlled

elsewhere in Europe."

The Home Office confirmed that even if mephedrone is purchased before any ban, "it would be unlawful to possess and supply from the date of implementation of any new law".

But a ban on specific, named chemicals – the cathinones – would leave the door open for creative chemists to synthesise new compounds that have not yet been identified. Some vendors say they will simply find other drugs to sell which are still legal.

"Unless the UK converts to an Analogue Act, as the US has, the British legal highs industry will carry on. We'll just find something else to get around the law," said one dealer. "Of course I'm looking for something new and legal. There'll definitely be huge demand for new stimulants if mephedrone is banned," he says.

Short of banning the import of any white powder that improves mood or stimulates the human central nervous system and opening every package imported into the UK, it would hard to counter the inevitable sale of new breeds of unresearched chemicals that are waiting in the wings.

Even if the government bans mephedrone and methylone, the research chemical genie is well and truly out of the bottle. A brief scan of online vendors and bulletin boards reveals many contenders for the next wave of legal highs. Buphedrone, Flephedrone, MDAI, MDPV and Desoxypradol are all available, all currently legal, and the latter three are unlikely to be covered by a new law banning cathinone derivative drugs.

And the rise of a mainstream internet drug culture, where users, some of whom call themselves 'psychonauts', publish trip reports on new compounds online, is expanding day by day. What is more, users are already having multi-page discussions online about ways to combine the effects of new drugs with other legal highs and prescription drugs to mimic the effects of illegal chemicals.

It is this collaborative aspect of drug use, plus the impossibility of monitoring every sale and purchase made on the internet, that makes policing the market in new drugs an even more onerous task than policing our ports and streets.

■ **Mike Power** is a freelance journalist