

News

Policy makers face a growing range of illicit drugs and aggressive marketing

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Europe's antidrug policies must adapt to an increasingly complex and volatile market in synthetic recreational drugs, says the latest annual report by the Lisbon based European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.

Overall there has been no appreciable improvement in reducing the use of cocaine and heroin, but there are signs that cannabis is losing its popularity, especially among young people. However, the report emphasises the moving target that policy makers face as suppliers become more innovative in their products and ability to circumvent controls.

It identifies a growing trend: the emergence of a "legal highs" market. This involves the use of smokable herbal mixtures such as the "Spice" brand, although some mixtures have been found to contain cannabinoids. These are increasingly sold in "head" or "smart" shops or on the internet.

Analysis by the drugs agency showed that almost half (48%) of the 115 online retailers surveyed were offering Spice. These were based in 14 European countries, but most (42%) were located in the United Kingdom.

Commenting on the phenomenon, Wolfgang Götz, the agency's director, said, "Attempts to circumvent drug controls by marketing unregulated substitutes are not new. What is new is the wide range of substances now being explored, the aggressive marketing of products that have been intentionally mislabelled, the growing use of the internet, and the speed at which the market reacts to control measures."

The report highlights the growing use of polydrugs, where more than one licit and illicit drug may be taken together—a practice almost always involving alcohol. It notes, "In Europe today, polydrug use patterns are widespread, and the combined use of different substances is responsible for, or complicates, most of the problems we face."

It presents three main user profiles: co-users of heroin and cocaine, co-users of cocaine and cannabis or alcohol, and co-users of cannabis and alcohol. Data on drug use in the 15-34 year age group show that frequent or heavy alcohol users are 2-6 times more likely than the general population to have used cannabis in the previous year.

The drugs agency echoed the view of David Nutt, the UK's former top drugs adviser, on the dangers of alcohol, when it pointed to the need "for more interventions targeting alcohol and alcohol use, both at the market level and at the level of social norms" in the fight against polydrug use.

Mr Götz declined to comment on the recent dismissal by the home secretary, Alan Johnson, of Professor Nutt as the chairman of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. Mr Johnson dismissed him on the grounds that he had overstepped the line between giving advice and trying to change policy (BMJ 2009;339:b4563, doi:10.1136/bmj.b4563).

However, Mr Götz appeared to give tacit support to Professor Nutt when he noted at the launch of the annual report that "effective and evidence based policies are increasingly necessary as challenges in the drugs field grow more complex."

Notes

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Footnotes

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2009 Annual Report: *The State of the Drugs Problem in Europe* is at www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/annual-report/2009.

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