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Experts deliver warning on emerging psychoactive substances (EPS) and hallucinogens

- Four out of 10 regular psychostimulant users have used an EPS in the past six months
- Frequency of use remains low – one or two occasions in six months
- Some users seeking out hallucinogens, but many take them inadvertently
- Effects are unpredictable and associated with bizarre behaviour
- In Europe the number of known emerging psychoactive substances (EPS) now exceeds the number of drugs under international control

More than 40 per cent of all regular psychostimulant users have used an emerging psychoactive substance (EPS) in the previous six months according to research to be released by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at a conference in Melbourne next week on 15 October.

Chief Investigator of the annual survey of regular psychostimulant users, UNSW Senior Lecturer Dr Lucy Burns, warned that the content of the drugs was often unknown to users and the effects were unpredictable, with potentially serious consequences.

The conference will also hear from European and New Zealand experts who are grappling with similar problems. Paul Griffiths, chief scientist from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), will report from Europe where 251 types of EPS were identified in mid-2012, for the first time exceeding the number of substances under international control.

Dr Chris Wilkins from New Zealand will discuss that country's ground-breaking new psychoactive substances regulations, which puts the onus on producers to demonstrate their products are low risk, similar to the testing procedures used for pharmaceutical products.

Dr Burns said that while use of the new drugs was sporadic with most users only having taken them on one or two days over the previous six months, their consumption among regular psychostimulant users had become more firmly established over the past four years.

One of the more common types of EPS in use is the 2C-X family which have hallucinogenic qualities. Dr Burns said there was anecdotal evidence users were inadvertently taking drugs with hallucinogenic properties and exposing themselves to unexpected harm.

“One reason why users might take an EPS such as 2C-B or 2C-I is that it may have been passed off as ecstasy in order to get a higher price for the drug,” Dr Burns said.

“A high proportion of the problems we are seeing stem from people inadvertently taking a drug with psychedelic qualities and exposing themselves to a “bad trip” which can take several hours to come down from.

“As well we know that regular psychostimulant users are polydrug users with many drinking alcohol at the same time and magnifying the effects of the drug.”

The Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) surveyed 686 regular psychostimulant users (RPU) in early 2013 and found 44 per cent had used an EPS - including synthetic cannabis - in the previous six months. This was up from 40 per cent in 2012.

EPS are substances which are variants of or mimic a parent compound which is usually a prohibited drug such as cocaine or MDMA (ecstasy). A class of EPS which is particularly common is phenethylamines. These include the 2C-I and 2C-B drug types belonging to the 2C-X family, which have psychedelic qualities, and which both saw a significant increase in use in 2012 and 2013. Use of other types of EPS such as mephedrone remained stable over the reporting period. Synthetic cannabinoids are still the most commonly used EPS, but use has remained stable at 16 per cent of regular psychostimulant users and use of the other types of EPS are catching up.

Use of older hallucinogens such as ketamine and LSD was also up in 2013 compared to 2012, from 14% to 19% and 34% to 43% respectively.

Of those who had used an EPS, only 4% had obtained their last purchase on the internet, with dealers (11%) and friends (26%) the more likely source.

Dr Burns said NDARC’s Drug Trends Program has been tracking use of ecstasy and other stimulants for the past 11 years and for the past four has been monitoring the use of EPS among this group.

“It is clear from the last four years’ of data that EPS is now a drug class with an established presence among the regular psychostimulant users’ community,” Dr Burns said.

The EDRS reporting system is a major source of sample estimates on the use of the drugs, she said.

“There is currently no data on how many people in the Australian general population are using emerging psychoactive substances. However, if a minority of regular psychostimulant users are using them on only an occasional basis, as we have seen, we can be reasonably confident in stating use in the general Australian population will be very low.”

The 2013 findings from the Ecstasy and Related Drug reporting System (EDRS) will be presented at the National Drug Trends Conference in Melbourne today (October 15)

- Ends -

For more information and more detailed findings from each state and territory, please see the attachment *Key findings - Drug Trends Conference Handout*.

Media conference

Media are invited to attend the National Drug Trends conference for a media briefing.

Speakers: Dr Lucy Burns, National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, EDRS Chief Investigator, National;
Professor Paul Dietze, Burnett Institute, EDRS Chief Investigator, Victoria.

Time: 10:00am

When: Tuesday 15 October 2013

Where: The State Library of Victoria

Conference Centre, Entry 3, located at 179 La Trobe Street, Melbourne

About the Ecstasy and Related Drug Reporting System (EDRS)

The Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) monitors the price, purity, availability and patterns of use of illicit drugs such as ecstasy, methamphetamine, cocaine, ketamine, GHB and LSD among people who regularly use psychostimulants.

The term “ecstasy and related drugs” (ERD) includes drugs that are routinely used in the context of entertainment venues and other recreational locations including nightclubs, dance parties, pubs and music festivals. ERD includes ecstasy, methamphetamine, cocaine, LSD, MDA, GHB and emerging psychoactive substances (EPS).

These surveys of drug users are designed to provide early warnings of trends. **The results of the EDRS are NOT representative of drug use among the general population**, nor are they intended to be. The results are intended to indicate emerging trends to assist policy makers, law enforcers and clinicians.

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