



Web opens new world of drugs for kids

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The internet and its shadier sidekick, the darkweb, are dramatically altering drug use among young people, providing around-the-clock worldwide access to a wide range of drugs, chemicals and supplements and creating a conundrum for authorities, educators and policymakers.

This week's alarming case on the Gold Coast, where seven Year 10 students overdosed while at school, has baffled drug experts for a range of reasons.

The substance involved — thought to be a Russian drug

called phenibut that, until a Therapeutic Goods Administration clampdown earlier this month, was readily available online — is not a household name.

But recent evidence suggests teenagers are increasingly turning to over-the-counter pharmaceuticals, such as paracetamol and ibuprofen, often mixing them with other drugs or alcohol in order to get high.

"It's a whole new world," says one former Gold Coast principal.

"If a kid gets caught with pot, they are excluded, it's simple. But if a kid gets caught with an antidepressant or sleeping pills ... I don't know. This is not an area schools are ready for."

While the exact circumstances are still under investigation, St Stephen's College principal Jamie Dorrington said a teacher had noticed several boys were "not concentrating" on Wednesday morning and escorted them to the school's health centre.

The first call to the emergency services went out at 12.47pm. The symptoms varied, depending on how much of the powdered substance had been ingested. One boy was lapsing in and out of consciousness, and ambulance officers put him on oxygen to maintain respiration. Others were disorientated or nauseous.

The four most seriously affected boys are believed to have been intubated before being admitted to intensive care. All are expected to make a full recovery, and only one remains in hospital.

A class of drug known as a nootropic, or a "smart drug", phenibut is designed to enhance brain function and elevate mood. It has no stimulatory effects and is often used by anxiety sufferers as a relaxant. Legal in Russia, it was available online until the TGA declared it prohibited in Australia.

Monica Barratt, a research fellow with the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, said phenibut was not typically associated with high-risk drug-taking behaviour.

"But if there is this generational move away from getting high, drunk or messy, we could be seeing a move towards drugs with other motivations," she said.

According to the Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug survey released in 2016, minors are drinking and smoking less than they did 20 years ago. The use of opiates, such as heroin and morphine, has also fallen, while cocaine and ecstasy use, although uncommon, has remained stable.

Among 12- to 17-year-olds, cannabis is the most commonly used illicit drug, with 13.6 per cent reporting having used it in the previous year, followed by tranquillisers (12 per cent) and inhalants (11.4 per cent). But the study did not canvas young people on their illicit use of over-the-counter or prescription medicines.

Drug and Alcohol Research and Training Australia director Paul Dillon said the use of the internet and social media to access drugs was a trend that warranted attention. "We are entering a new era of accessibility to these substances, where people are ordering online and getting them through the post," he said.

"But it's tended to be older people. The fact that we've now seen 14- and 15-year-olds — whose brains are still developing — doing it is really confronting and frightening.

"Things are changing so quickly. And, with technology in the picture, kids are always two steps ahead."

AIMING HIGH

Prevalence (%) of drug use in the past year



among students aged 12 to 17

Cannabis	13.6
Tranquillisers	12
Inhalants	11.4
Ecstasy	2.6
Hallucinogens	2.2
Amphetamines	1.9
Steroids	1.8
Cocaine	1.4
Opiates	1.1

2014 data

Source: DARTA