The articles overleaf appears in the January/February 2010 issue of Druglink magazine

Also featured in the January/February Druglink:

In this issue we focus on 'new drugs'. In addition to our double feature on mephedrone, we also report from K-day – an event where ketamine users expressed concerns over the lack of treatment options available to them and we hear from a treatment service in Kent about their approach to dealing with so-called ‘legal highs’.

Elsewhere there are reports on the harsh treatment handed out to sports stars caught taking drugs, how homeless drug users are failed by a divided system and a successful trial of naloxone overdose kits.

About Druglink magazine:

Druglink is DrugScope’s bimonthly magazine for all UK professionals interested in drugs and drug-related issues whether it’s treatment, public health, education and prevention, criminal justice or international.

Druglink includes the latest news, feature articles, interviews, factsheets, reviews and listings.

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Orient express

How mephedrone shook the drug trade
Teenage kicks

How did the isolated County Durham village of Cockfield kick off a nationwide panic over legal highs? Max Daly investigates

In the vast, thinly populated landscape that dominates the peaceful district of Teesdale in south west County Durham, lies the old mining village of Cockfield. It has a primary school, a village hall, a few shops, two pubs, the obligatory Chinese take-away and a working men’s club on its last legs. At the risk of offending the villagers of Low Wham to the north and Staindrop to the south, Cockfield is pretty much in the middle of nowhere.

There’s not a lot for teenagers to do: one of the most popular hang-outs is outside the local Co-Op. Buses run infrequently to the nearby towns of Bishop Auckland and Barnard Castle, while a bus to the larger town of Darlington is a three hour round-trip.

It’s probably safe to say that few people outside Teesdale, which lists tractor and quad bike thefts as its most taxing crimes, would have heard of Cockfield. But that was before the village found itself the unlikely focal point of a national drug panic around the cocaine-ecstasy style legal high, mephedrone.

“We have seen five young local people admitted to hospital in recent weeks after taking mephedrone,” Inspector Kevin Tuck of Durham Police, told local newspaper reporters in November. “One person in Cockfield took 36 hours to come down from his high.”

Police warned that anyone found with a bag of suspicious white powder could be arrested, taken to a cell and have their DNA and fingerprints taken. Cockfield was identified by police as being the source of the spread of mephedrone use in Teesdale.

“Fuelled by reports that mephedrone may have caused the death of 14-year-old schoolgirl Gabrielle Price at a Brighton house party, the BBC and Sky News descended on Teesdale to broadcast live on how the ‘mephedrone menace’ had come from nowhere to grip youngsters in the area. Home Secretary Alan Johnson was quizzed in the House of Commons by MPs eager to find out what the drug was and how soon it could be banned. Johnson reminded them that the government’s drug advisory body, the ACMD, was preparing a report on mephedrone that is due out soon.

Over the next fortnight, police, NHS and drug services around rural Britain – from Sussex and Hampshire to Shrewsbury, Burnley, Barnsley and deepest Scotland – declared that they too had young people getting into trouble with mephedrone.

One boarding school in Kent suspended three sixth form students after they arranged a shipment of mephedrone to be delivered to their dorms before handing it out at a party in a nearby village.

As Druglink exclusively reported in March last year, the drug, disguised by vendors as ‘plant food’ in order to circumvent trade and medicine laws, has generated big interest on ‘underground’ internet bulletin boards and among urban middle class dabblers because it is cheaper and easier to buy than street cocaine or ecstasy.

But mephedrone’s legality, easy availability and low cost – at around £14 a gram – makes it an attractive option to bored teenagers looking for kicks in rural Britain. And it was bored teenagers with a ‘kids let loose in a sweetshop’ opportunity to get as out of it as possible who were the most likely mephedrone buyers to pop up on the police radar.

“They started getting off their heads on this new drug they were calling ‘drone’ in the summer,” says Julie [not her real name], the mother of the teenager from Cockfield whose hospital visit and ‘36-hour high’ had become national news. She decided to talk exclusively to Druglink after being shocked that a legal drug could have such a powerful effect on her son. Julie describes her son as a popular boy who has been a risk-taker and ‘hyper’ since childhood.

“Lee [not his real name] and some of his mates started taking it at the weekends. Then they were on it every day, snorting or swallowing it, usually with alcohol in one of their bedrooms. I could tell they were taking it because it’s got a horrible smell, like one of those sickly sweet air fresheners.”

Julie says that Lee, who is unemployed but earns cash grouse beating during the shooting season, started looking really unhealthy and drawn. He didn’t eat properly and he was taking valium to deal with the comedowns. “They were saying it’s legal, and I was saying it can’t be if it’s doing this to you,” says Julie.

One Thursday in July, according to his mother, Lee and four mates received a bulk delivery of mephedrone that kick-started a five-day drugs and drinking
January/February 2010

Drugs Link | 9

It was after four more young people were taken to hospital after using mephedrone – the final straw was a teenage boy taken to A&E after his heart rate rose to 170bpm – that police, along with the area’s drug services, decided to issue a press release warning of the dangers of the legal high.

“It might not be a police problem because it’s legal, but it’s a public safety issue, and it’s our duty to protect the public, so that’s why we got involved,” says Sgt Michael Urwin, as we drive around Cockfield’s deserted streets. “So we got together with drug workers and colleagues in primary care and said ‘we are not having this’. It’s causing significant amounts of harm for everyone to sit up and take notice.”

We pass the Co-Op, where Lee and a small gang of boys like to stand outside causing minor nuisances. “Recently the local council tried playing classical music through speakers outside the shop to try and scare the group away. But they just ended up whistling Mozart all day,” says Julie.

China crisis: Sgt Mike Urwin holding a bag of the research chemical that has proved so popular with Teesdale teenagers
NEW DRUG TRENDS ARE SOMETHING I WOULD EXPECT TO START IN AN INNER CITY, SO IT TOOK US BY SURPRISE THAT WE HAD ONE IN OUR MIDST

users of cocaine. “Oddly, it was because of the close knit communities around here that it spread so quickly, but also the close knit thing was maybe why we identified the problem quicker than other parts of the country.”

Tracy Blandford, chief executive of YMCA Barnard Castle, which provides a drop-in centre for local teenagers, says mephedrone’s legal status means it holds less fear for young people than other drugs do. “I don’t think they think that because it’s legal it will create less risks to their health. They are not thinking about their safety, they are thinking about getting in less trouble with parents and police. There’s very much a vibe among young people that adults can’t do anything about it,” says Blandford.

Unlike most drugs, Blandford points out, mephedrone was something that children knew far more about than adults. “I think sometimes adults are scared of talking about a new drug for fear it will alert young people to it. But in this case young people have been talking about mephedrone since the summer.

But why the Teesdale area? “Mephedrone really seems to have stuck in this town. Users are not reliant on an underground chain of supply and it’s very easy for young people to get hold of and to sell it to their friends. Everyone knows everyone, so mephedrone got passed around very quickly.

Most teenagers will, even if they haven’t taken it themselves, know where to get mephedrone from here. There is a big weekend alcohol culture here and mephedrone is very much mixed in with that. It’s a very rural thing – out on the green spaces getting drunk.”

Police forces looking for a way of tackling legal highs ahead of any changes to the Misuse of Drugs Act are keeping a keen eye on a case currently playing out at Isle of Wight magistrates court. In December, Martin Smith, a 49-year-old man from Newport became the first person in the country to be charged with selling a legal high, in this case the product Space E, believed to contain mephedrone. Smith, who runs a head shop in Newport, was charged with two offences under ‘General Product Safety Regulations 2005’ and one offence under ‘Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008’. The laws cover issues around whether products are safe for human consumption.

Smith’s case was due for a preliminary hearing at court on January 12 as Druglink went to press.

The message to stay away from mephedrone appears to have hit home in the area’s ‘legal high’ head shops. Upstairs in Pipe Dreams, located in an alley off Bishop Auckland’s high street, an array of packages containing legal highs such as pep pills, salvia, Snow Blow, Diablo and Blow Out lie behind a glass cabinet. The vampy looking shop assistant wearing a vast array of facial piercings said they did not stock mephedrone. “It’s causing a lot of problems with my friends, young boys I know are getting ill. People are coming into the shop saying it’s too much.”

Although Lee spent a week recovering from his high profile mephedrone binge shut away in a bedroom at his mother’s house in Cockfield, Julie says it hasn’t scared him off. “I got him some food because he hadn’t eaten for days. He stayed in his bedroom for a week. He posted on Facebook saying he would never take it again. But after a week he was back on it. In fact he was on it all through last weekend.”

“In the village I can see lots of kids taking it, even the really academic girls you don’t expect. But if it becomes illegal there will always be something else. Anyway, they’ll still carry on buying and using it – cocaine’s illegal and they still do that.”

Sgt Urwin. “There’s not a lot for kids to do round here,” he says. “They tried opening a youth club, but it just didn’t work, not everyone was interested. Most kids stay home and play computer games.”

He says before Lee was arrested, no-one in Teesdale had ever heard of mephedrone. “New drug trends are something I would expect to start in an inner city, so it took us by surprise that we had one in our midst,” he says. “In most cases, we are seeing the drug being taken with alcohol, but also with cocaine, speed, ecstasy and ketamine.

“We started looking into mephedrone on the internet and were surprised to see it was legal. We found sites selling it, discussion boards and that it was being sent by first class mail to people’s doorsteps. There was an attitude among young people that we couldn’t touch them because they were doing nothing against the law.”

The legality of the drug is throwing up new dilemmas for police. They know in which pubs mephedrone is being sold and snorted – in one, staff have been offered lines by customers – yet they are powerless to do anything about it.

What is more, people they arrest in possession of white powder are demanding it back once it has been tested by forensics, on the basis that it is legally purchased property. In response, Durham Constabulary solicitors have drawn up disclaimer forms which suspects are asked to sign to waive their right to have seized mephedrone returned to them.

Sgt Urwin said the use of mephedrone, ironically for the police, may have been brought about by police tightening the screws on Teesdale’s already limited cocaine dealing network.

“But why the Teesdale area? It’s a very rural thing – out on the green spaces getting drunk.”
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-methylethcathinone.’

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 undercut 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.

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 400 per cent are possible. Despite high profile food health scares from China –

In the US, the Federal Analogue Act defines compounds that are “substantially similar” in their chemical structure and effect on humans as ‘analouques’ 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.”
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 chemicals 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 Desoxyxipipradrol 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 ‘psychoauts’, 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