

THE EMERALD EXPERIMENT



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Bold new laws introduced in Ireland to tackle legal highs and NPS dramatically cut the number of head shops. But the country's drug users merely switched substances or modes of supply. **Tim Bingham** reports.

Internationally, there has been a lot of interest in relation to Ireland's Novel Psychoactive Substance Act 2010 and the impact this has had on the country's head shop trade. But to start off, a quick bit of context.

The first head shop opened in Ireland in 2000, although it sold only drug paraphernalia. By 2005, there were six head shops in Dublin city centre selling cacti that contained mescaline. These were being sold for between €30 to €400. During this time magic mushrooms were starting to be sold in a few of these shops.

In 2006, 1-benzylpiperazine (BZP) tablets emerged onto the market and were being sold in these shops as herbal ecstasy. Around this time, head shops expanded and young people who were not using drugs were being introduced to these substances as 'legal highs'. Tablets sold for around €5 and the average pill contained 540mg of BZP.

In 2007, white powder products started to emerge in the head shops. The majority of these were cathinone-based products such as mephedrone and were selling for €25 per half gram.

At around this time there were calls

to ban BZP, which by this time had started to dominate the traditional ecstasy market. Most of these tablets were being sold as ecstasy. Garda official seizure figures at the time confirm this: less than 19,000 ecstasy tablets were seized in 2009, compared with 119,000 in 2008 and 285,000 in 2007. BZP was banned in March 2009.

Meanwhile, in late 2008, phenylmethylethylketone, the ecstasy precursor, became unavailable in Europe. This had a significant effect on the quality and quantity of ecstasy tablets available in Ireland.

So with the double whammy of a paucity of ecstasy and a ban on its inferior imitator BZP, white powder substances filled the void and grew in popularity. However, services were reporting that the most common of these powders, mephedrone, was causing significant problems, specifically at the time among the homeless population.

Van Hout & Bingham (2011) undertook a study among clients that were injecting mephedrone called *A costly turn on: Patterns of use and perceived consequences of mephedrone based head shop products amongst Irish injectors*. Speaking to colleagues in other European countries, no one else was reporting that mephedrone was being injected.

During the next few years head shops were opening in virtually every town in Ireland. Some began offering home delivery services and were open 24 hours a day. The Gardi said that mephedrone was directly linked to a spike in crime, particularly theft and mugging, among young people who had not been in contact with Gardi before.

“The whole head shop thing was a massive deal for us,” one Garda officer told me. “The drugs they sold broke down barriers and taboos. People who had never ever come to the attention of the Gardaí, who came from good homes and had a good education, were all of a sudden robbing people in the street and beating them. Their motive for doing it was to get more money to buy this stuff. Our robberies were going through the roof because people were becoming addicted.”

On the 23rd August 2010, the Psychoactive Substances Act became law. The ultimate aim of this legislation was to shut down the head shop industry. Overnight four tonnes of psychoactive substances were handed to the police as shops closed their shutters. But as many people working in the field had predicted, after the head shops closed down, the substances still found their way onto the streets of Ireland.

In addition Zopiclone and Xanax, smuggled into Ireland from Pakistan, India and China and sold on the illicit market from legal prescriptions, began to grow in popularity among heroin users because of the heroin drought.

Indeed, the Act generated a resurgence of BZP tablets. One Garda source said: “With the closure of the head shops a lot of drug use went

underground, back onto banned substances. In one instance we seized 500,000 BZP tablets. The person who was holding onto them was of the firm belief they were ecstasy tablets.”

The new law has been effective in terms of young people accessing these substances through retail outlets. However, services are reporting that they are seeing an increase in young people accessing services with mental health issues related to synthetic cannabis products.

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Research carried out by Denis Murray of Ireland’s Health Services Executive published last year showed a rise in drug debts related to the buying of NPS. The study, *Professionals’ Understanding of Risk Factors for Substance Misuse by Young People and Approaches to Intervention*, published by the National University of Galway, highlighted young people with poor school attendance and indebtedness, resulting in families being intimidated by drug dealers and an increase in the number of young people absconding from home due to spiralling drug debts.

Indebtedness relates primarily to synthetic cannabinoids and to amounts of between €50 and €3600. The research found that young people are obtaining synthetic cannabinoids from the internet and the street. Some are being sold synthetic cannabis as real cannabis.

So where is Ireland at in terms of drug use trends? The most recent statistics, which cover 2010, published last year by the National Drug Treatment Reporting System show that for under-18s, cannabis – whether synthetic or not – accounted for almost 50 per cent of treatment presentations.

Evidence from law enforcement reflects this trend. The Garda’s 2012

annual report reveals almost €71m worth of cannabis was seized, compared to €42m in 2011. Although the police have heightened the value of cannabis plants, artificially increasing the value of plants seized, twice as many plants were seized and tested by the Forensic Science Laboratory in 2012 compared to the previous year.

The report showed some 5.6kg of MDMA powder was seized in 2012, compared to just under 1kg in 2011. Overall, 165,000 tablets were seized in 2012 compared to 101,000 in 2011.

However, despite the law change, the seizures of MDMA paled in comparison to the seizures of NPS. There continues to be a significant market in banned head shop drugs, with similar quantities of new synthetic stimulants (46kg) and synthetic cannabis mixtures (32kg) being intercepted in 2012 compared to the year before, of synthetic cannabis were seized in 2012.

It’s now easy to access these substances via the internet and through the postal system. Customs figures show that, post 2011, there have 808 seizures of NPS at the border. Intriguingly, the vast majority of these seizures, 614, were of NPS imported from Hungary.

This country’s new Psychoactive Substances Act has been effective in closing down head shops and it appears that the result of this has been to dent the ‘legal high’ status of NPS – as most are now bought on the illicit market. But there have been unintended consequences of the Act, whereby some young people are moving over to using other, more risky, substances from street dealers.

Certainly, banned NPS are still available and being sold under a different name. We know that mephedrone is now a frequent cutting agent in cocaine and even ecstasy pills. Some former NPS buyers have merely shifted their drug of choice and there is growing evidence they are using anti-anxiety medications, while ketamine is on the increase among Irish clubbers.

In conclusion, the Act hasn’t made drug use any safer, as drug workers and drug users have even less idea as to what the contents of the pills and powders really are now.

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