

PARTY DRUG USERS' PERCEPTIONS OF RISK

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I am going to be talking on the risk and benefits users perceive to be associated with ecstasy and other party drugs, based on the findings of the Party Drug Initiative (PDI). First of all I would like to acknowledge the party drug users who gave their time to share their experience and knowledge in this study. I would also like to recognise the PDI researchers around the country, and also other members of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) team that I work along side including Louisa Degenhardt and Courtney Broom.

The Party Drug Initiative is a national monitoring study aimed at detecting changes in the markets for ecstasy and other party drugs. Whilst the study had previously been conducted in New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland, 2003 was the first year it was conducted nationally, and was also the first year that data on the risks and benefits of drug use was collected. So today I will be presenting themes that emerged from the national data, but will also be focusing on New South Wales specifically.

The New South Wales sample was very similar in demographic characteristics to the national sample. The majority of both samples were male and had similar median ages. About one third of the samples were employed full-time and approximately a quarter were engaged in other part-time work, full-time study or were unemployed. A small proportion of both samples reported currently being in treatment, or had a prison history. I just want to again illustrate the similarities between the New South Wales and the national samples and also demonstrate the extent of poly-drug use in both groups.

A similar number of drugs had ever been used and an average of seven had been used in the last six months. By definition all were lifetime and recent users of ecstasy; the vast majority reported lifetime and recent use of alcohol, cannabis and speed, and over half of both samples reported ever using crystal and a similar proportion reported having used crystal in the last six months. Interestingly, the prevalence of cocaine, ketamine and GHB use was higher in the New South Wales sample compared to the national sample, although reasons for this are unclear. Still, approximately half the national sample reported having ever tried cocaine and ketamine and about a quarter reported having used these drugs in the last six months. One fifth of the national sample had used GHB, of whom half had used recently, while in New South Wales this rate was slightly higher, with a third having ever used and about a fifth reporting use in the last six months.

In 2003, users were asked whether they perceived any risks to be associated with a range of party drugs, and if they answered 'yes' they were then asked to specify the risks. I would like to highlight that while I am presenting the themes that emerged from the national data, these are preliminary results. I will also go into the New South Wales findings in greater detail, given that the samples are similar in demographic and drug use characteristics, and because I am more familiar with this data at this stage.

At a national level there were seven main themes to emerge from the data, although there were some variations between states and also drugs in terms of proportions reporting each. Psychological harms included the risk of addiction or dependence and other mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Physical harms included the risk of both fatal and non-fatal over-dose, as well as the risk of dehydration and nasal damage. Harms associated with the illicit status of the drug included reports of potential for substances to contain contaminants and were generally captured by the quote: “you never really know what you are going to get”. Harms related to the effects of intoxication included impaired decision making, taking unnecessary risks, and increased vulnerability as a result of drug use. Neurological harms included risks related to brain function or cognitive impairment, and also damage to memory. Legal problems included the risk of getting into trouble with the law, while financial problems included spending too much money on drugs or getting into debt as a result of drug use.

Those were some of the common themes emerging from the national data, and I am going to present some of the New South Wales data in terms of these themes in relation to five different drugs.

To begin with ecstasy, over a third of those who commented in New South Wales perceived both psychological and physical risks associated with ecstasy as well as harms related to the illicit status of the drug. Depression was the most common mental health related issue, followed by addiction or dependence and also paranoia. Commonly reported physical problems were acute health problems such as weight loss and skin problems, whilst death was another risk perceived to be related to ecstasy use, followed by de-hydration. The unknown content of pills was the most commonly mentioned risk associated with the illicit status of the drug, while smaller proportions reported the other harms that I mentioned previously.

Two-thirds of those who specified risks associated with speed and crystal reported potential psychological harm, although addiction or dependence was more likely to be associated with crystal use, while anxiety, psychosis and other mental health issues were more commonly associated with speed. Most of the physical harms perceived to be associated with both speed and crystal use are related to acute health problems such as trouble sleeping and weight loss. Potential nasal damage was associated with speed use only, which is consistent with it being the most commonly reported route of administration in this sample. And again smaller numbers reported the other problems related to each form of methamphetamine.

Addiction or dependence was also the most commonly perceived psychological harm related to cocaine, while acute physical problems and nasal damage were the most frequently mentioned physical harms. And reflecting the fairly high price of cocaine in Australia almost one fifth of those who commented reported financial problems associated with use of cocaine.

In contrast to the psychostimulant drugs mentioned so far, relatively few psychological harms were perceived to be related to the use of ketamine. Instead, almost half of those that commented reported risks associated with intoxication including the Ketamine induced disassociative state that is described as a near death experience by users - and also increased vulnerability and increased accidents as a

result of being under the influence of ketamine. Other risks associated with ketamine were related to potential physical harms including non-fatal overdose and acute health related issues such as vomiting.

As with ketamine, few participants reported psychological harms associated with GHB use. Instead, fatal and non-fatal overdose were the most frequently reported risks, followed by increased vulnerability associated with the intoxicated state.

This slide (refers to screen) summarises the previous four slides by comparing commonly perceived risks across drug types. What can be seen here is, that while a wide range of harms were specified in relation to ecstasy use, other drug types were typically associated with only one or two types specifically. So psychological harms for example, particularly addiction or dependence, were commonly reported risks associated with stimulant drugs, particularly crystal and cocaine. And while physical harms were commonly perceived as being related to the use of all five drugs, the proportion reporting non-fatal overdose as a risk of GHB was particularly high. Harms related to the illicit status of the drug were commonly reported in relation to ecstasy and speed, with most reports referring to the unknown content of these substances, or substances purchased under these names. Only small numbers reported this risk for ketamine and GHB, which is consistent with these drugs being more likely to be diverted pharmaceuticals, rather than manufactured in clandestine laboratories.

Participants in 2003 were also asked to specify any benefits they perceived to be associated with the range of drugs, and again I will be presenting overall themes to emerge at a national level, then looking at New South Wales in more detail. Users were able to identify and specify a wide range of benefits related to various drugs. There were five main themes to emerge from the data, although these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Nevertheless the benefits identified at a national level included those associated with altered moods, such as getting high and also the relaxation effects with the drug. Social purposes were also reported such as enhanced closeness with others and increased confidence, and also functional aspects, such as the ability to stay awake and an enhanced appreciation of dance and music.

Other benefits reported were drug specific, including enhanced sensation, enhanced perception, and enhanced sexual experiences. Interestingly, and also consistent with the poly-drug using nature of the sample, the reported benefits of some drugs related to the perception that they complimented the effect of other drugs by the enhancing or easing of their effects.

So looking now at the New South Wales data as an example. This slide (refers to screen) shows the top five benefits reported in New South Wales in relation to these five drugs. Similar to risks, a range of benefits were specified in relation to ecstasy, and not surprisingly both forms of methamphetamine were associated with increased energy and the ability to stay awake by large proportions of those who commented, while increased confidence was commonly reported to be a benefit of cocaine use. Interestingly, the specific drug effect of intoxication, identified as a risk of ketamine use, was also commonly cited as a benefit, whereby users reported the benefit of the altered state in distorting their perception. GHB was commonly perceived to be associated with enhanced mood.

I would just like to point out that in the New South Wales sample there were only three benefits that were reported to be associated with all five drugs and these were enhanced mood, relaxing or escaping, and also enhanced sexual experiences. As I mentioned previously, the findings I have presented today are preliminary and further analysis will be conducted to investigate the potential differences between age and gender, and also the impact of risk and benefit perceptions on the patterns of use. Further, the 2004 PDI Users Survey will investigate specific risks associated with routes of administration and sexual behaviours.

To conclude, regular ecstasy users were able to identify a range of risks and benefits associated with ecstasy and other party drug use. Our results indicate that harm reduction messages are reaching users, as evidenced by substantial proportions reporting a range of psychological and physical harms including dehydration and dependence. Further, the majority of those who commented were aware of the dangers of the dissociative effects of ketamine and the potential increased vulnerability associated with this state, and also the risk of GHB overdose. However, despite this knowledge, the prevalence of drug use in this sample is high, and further users are able to specify a very diverse range of benefits associated with the use of these drugs. It is therefore recommended that harm reduction efforts acknowledge the benefits associated with the use of these drugs to ensure risks are communicated to this well-informed group in a well-informed manner.

Thank you.