

PEER EDUCATION IN THE RAVE SCENE

Natalie Russell

VIVAIDS, Australia

I will be talking about the *Victorian Rave Safe Project*. Rave Safe within Victoria has been in operation now since 1995 in varying incarnations. I joined VIVAIDS as the Rave Safe Coordinator for the first full-time funded project in February of last year. So I will begin with a bit about the history of Rave Safe.

Initially it was formed by a group of ravers back in 1995 and this is when it operated purely voluntarily by a group of dedicated peers who set up this group in the recognition that by sharing their knowledge and experience of the dance scene and of party drugs, harms associated with party drug use could be reduced. Since 1997 Rave Safe has been funded by the *Department of Human Services* and from 1999 it was administered by VIVAIDS. In 2002/2003 Rave Safe for the first time became a fully funded project.

Just a bit of history about VIVAIDS and who VIVAIDS are. They are the Victorian Drug User Organisation and this is an organisation that is a non-judgemental one that actively seeks to address the health, social and legal issues that affect drug users in Victoria. VIVAIDS projects are informed by the principles of harm reduction, meaning that they aim to reduce drug-related harm without necessarily reducing an individual's drug use.

(Referring to screen) So the aim of Rave Safe is essentially a capacity-building project and it is aimed at increasing the capacity of individuals and organisations involved in the rave scene to minimise the harms associated with party drug use and as you can see the objectives are on the screen.

The project has two main components, being rave safe and party safe. The rave safe focus is on the raver or the substance user as an individual, with emphasis on responding to their safety and health information needs. It does this by attending events and generating resources to keep the individual up to date with drug and health information. Secondly, the party safe component of the project aims to target other groups and individuals who have the capacity to reduce party drug-related harm. These groups include event organisers, promoters, club staff and management, security, drug and alcohol workers, General Practitioners and other health professionals.

(Referring to screen) Rave Safe recognise some key strategies for addressing party drug use and we currently implement the following ones on the screen: peer education, working with and up-skilling event organisers and promoters, developing appropriate resources, developing and maintaining partnerships between stakeholders, influencing legislation and educating other groups such as school students and the wider community. Like I mentioned before, General Practitioners, it has been a fairly new strategy of the project to address them.

So, starting with peer education, Rave Safe is a peer-based project, meaning that the project development, implementation and evaluation is coordinated by myself plus a

team of 5 peer educators, all who have been recruited from the dance scene. So essentially it is a service run by ravers for ravers. The peer educators were employed at the beginning of the project through advertisements placed on dance music websites and in street press. They then embarked on a comprehensive training programme that has been ongoing throughout the year. Training that they have undertaken has included Level 2 First Aid, drugs and the party scene, safer partying habits, drug interactions, crisis identification and management, needle and syringe exchange, Hep C and safer injecting, and drugs and the law. So as a team of well-trained and well-equipped 6 peer educators, we attend a mixture of indoor and outdoor events and club events from 200 people in size up to 15,000.

(Referring to screen) That is just an example of the sign that we put up in the toilets at the events that we are attending on the back of the toilet doors. Another strategic place is inside the party - just so that people know that we are there and supplies that we can provide them with.

The Rave Safe team has two primary roles at dance event, one being providers of drug information, both verbal and written, and secondly acting as a carer service looking after punters who may be unwell or anxious. Promoters are advised that Rave Safe, although Level 2 First Aid trained, do not replace the provision of an appropriate first aid service. We are there in addition to a first aid service. Rave Safe often collaborates with first aid at events, so we ensure that any unwell punters that may approach us - that may be sick, may be overdosing, they might have a friend that is overdosing - are passed directly on to first aid.

In turn, the first aid services communicate with us as to the effects of particular drugs on individuals that they are not familiar with and refer partygoers on to us. At each event, we set up a marquee with blankets and beanbags, which act as a safe chill-out space, where partygoers can sit, relax and chat with us about party drugs, safer partying and other health issues. We also distribute safer partying packs, hand out fruit, earplugs, and we are licensed to provide sterile injecting equipment discreetly upon request. Again, this is at the discretion of the event organiser. We inform them that we are able to offer this service but it is up to the event organiser if they would like us to do that at their party. So over the past year the peer educators have distributed over 8,000 resources at parties and answered over a thousand questions. Some of the common issues that the Rave Safe team have dealt with include uneasy partygoers, who are new to a drug experience and require reassurance; those who have taken large doses of MDMA; bad acid trips and GHB overdoses (they are just some of the common ones.)

So, in addition to peer education on site at an event, Rave Safe also offers partygoers the opportunity to further develop their knowledge of party drugs and harm reduction through the attendance at a Rave Safe safer partying workshop. (Referring to screen) These free, 3-hour workshops cover these topics on screen. They are conducted in partnership with Enlighten, who is the pill-testing agency in Melbourne, and Fitro Legal Service, and each participant receives a safer partying show bag of information. One of our participants who attended the workshop stated that: "The Rave Safe workshops provide a safe, relaxed and realistic place to learn about the drugs we are taking, harm minimisation and what we are actually putting into our bodies. As a regular party drug user I learned a lot from the workshop and it was a place where I

felt free to discuss the issues related with party drugs and the scene, with people who are also users and are educated in this area. Education is the key. Zero tolerance is never going to be a reality. Keep it up guys.”

Also, at a recent rave that I attended, I had a girl approach me who attended one of our workshops and she informed me that, prior to the party she was at that evening, she had made all her friends sit down with her and read all the information she had obtained from the workshop, before they could actually leave to go to the event, which was quite interesting.

One of the other case studies works through up-skilling event organisers. As the goal of Rave Safe is to increase the capacity of individuals and organisations involved in the rave scene to minimise the harms associated with party drug use, we have recognised an important component of this has to be work force development. So in acknowledging this we have then begun to offer workshops to promoters and event organisers that cover: the services of Rave Safe, current drug trends, party drug effects and side effects, overdose recognition and response, health risks for people attending dance events, and recommendations for providing a safer environment. Each participant receives a promoter’s pack of information on party drugs, overdose response and Rave Safe information and booking form.

As the profile of Rave Safe has increased, we developed a workshop specifically dedicated to club staff, rather than just promoters. The development of this workshop involved collaboration with Drink Safe Technologies, Zoss Night Club and Rave Safe. Rave Safe is also partnered with the dance music events operation course at William Angler’s, to provide training to the students who are studying to become promoters.

Many of you will be aware that it is often the environment in which a rave or a dance party is held that impacts on the health and well-being of the partygoer. The set-up and facilities of a venue can have a large impact on the comfort and safety of those attending. In recognition of this issue, we developed an audit that is utilised at each event Rave Safe attends. This considers the provision of harm reduction strategies like free cold water, a chill-out space, appropriate ventilation, availability of first aid, and all those sorts of issues. Following an event, a report is provided back to the event organiser, with a list of recognitions for the positive strategies they are implementing, as well as recommendations for future parties. We believe that acknowledging and rewarding rave venues, that are implementing harm reduction strategies, is important in encouraging event organisers to implement safer parties. Rave Safe demonstrates support of promoters by spotlighting them in our monthly newsletter that goes out to our membership list. We also send them a Certificate of Appreciation for using Rave Safe at each event.

Rave Safe’s developed resources, aimed at educating promoters, event organisers and party drug users. As a peer education project it is essential that resources are received by users that are culturally relevant and well accepted by users. The Rave Safe party pack, which I have got here that I can give out to everyone, is small enough to enable ravers to conveniently put it in their pocket at an event, as no-one wants to carry around large sheets of paper. The inclusion of a condom, lube chlamydia card and information on the new water guidelines has made it a comprehensive health

promotion resource for partygoers. Over 3,000 packs were distributed at raves last year. Comments received from users include: “I found the booklet to be very helpful and because it was so small it was easy to carry around on the night and it is also good to put in my bag on other nights.”

We have also developed a document for promoters and event organisers to hold our recommendations for providing a safe dance environment and this provides guidance, for event organisers, in providing a safer environment to reduce the range of harms associated with drug use in raves and dance parties. These recommendations do not endorse illicit drug use within the party scene, but recognise that certain drugs are being used at such events, and they provide dance party promoters with guidelines of best practice and principles so they can safeguard the health and safety of people attending their events.

Electronic resources are a great way to reach youth and the youth culture. Rave safe identified the increasing reliance on the web and e-mail by many within the dance scene that use party drugs. So in light of this, Rave Safe developed a monthly e-newsletter that is mailed out to our members who join up at parties, that contains harm reduction advice and drug information in a common language. We recently evaluated the impact of this e-newsletter, with a majority of respondents stating it had increased both their knowledge of party drugs and safer partying. Many also indicated they forward the newsletter on to friends and shared the information obtained from the newsletter with friends at parties and at recoveries after a night out. One comment received by a recipient of the newsletter states: “I’ve been a subscriber to the Rave Safe newsletter for some time now and must admit that a lot of the information provided has been useful and the way in which your organisation reaches its clientele is appropriate. I’ve also been giving a lot of advice to people with information mostly from the newsletter and the informative links you guys provide.” Rave Safe’s also set up a party drugs forum on a well-known promoter’s web site after being approached by the promoter who was keen to offer harm reduction information to partygoers on his site.

To ensure a coordinated and collaborative approach to the implementation of the project, a reference group was established to oversee the project’s strategies and implementation. (Referring to screen) The reference group consists of representatives up on the screen. In addition to providing direction to the project, the reference group provides an opportunity for key stakeholders to discuss and address other relevant issues to party drugs. The attendance of the Department of Human Services at the Rave Safe reference group meetings provides the opportunity to discuss and provide some influence over appropriate legislation.

Lastly, just touching on some of the other strategies of the project, it is about providing education to other appropriate groups. Rave Safe has identified an increasing number of school students using party drugs, and to address this issue, Rave Safe offers safer partying workshops for senior students. Alcohol and other drug workers, General Practitioners and nurses have been other groups to receive workshops from Rave Safe, which has been a positive outcome for the project. At a recent General Practitioner education session that I gave, participants were asked whether the content was “what I need to know as a GP” and whether the session was

“likely to lead to some change in my clinical practice”; 93% agreed it was content they should know and 77% said it would lead to changes in their clinical practice.

So just in summary, the use of peer education as a tool to educate the rave culture has proven to be a successful model to educate party drug users within the rave and dance scenes. In addition, Rave Safe has identified a number of complementary strategies that aim to increase the capacity of both individuals and organisations involved in the rave scene to address party drug use. The importance of peer education can be best illustrated by the following thank-you’s we have received from ravers on the screen (referring to screen).

One last comment that we got from one person recently was: “I was at a rave event on Saturday night and I just wanted to thank all the people at Rave Safe for how helpful and nice they were to me. I lost all my friends during the night and had no one to talk to. I started talking to you guys there and you were all really good to me. Being able to talk to people who understand what was going on in my head when I was by myself was great, and the Rave Safe people really stopped me panicking about it. All I want to say is you are doing a great job and keep up the good work.”

Thanks.