



NATIONAL DRUG AND
ALCOHOL RESEARCH CENTRE

CONCERNS RAISED OVER WIDE RANGE OF DRUGS INJECTED BY USERS

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While the heroin market appears to have stabilized across Australia, the injection of a range of pharmaceutical preparations appears to be on the increase based on interviews conducted with a sample of 970 injecting drug users (IDU) across Australia. Substantial proportions of these IDU reported recent injection of morphine, pharmaceutical stimulants such as dexamphetamine, and benzodiazepines, according to research released today.

These are the findings from the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS), a research project coordinated by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) and funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and the National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund. The IDRS monitors the price, purity, availability and use of the four main illicit drug types – heroin, amphetamine, cocaine and cannabis.

To provide timely information on emerging illicit drug trends, interviews are carried out with people who regularly inject drugs, and with professionals in drug-related fields. The results of these interviews are compared with trends observed in other indicators of drug use, such as drug seizures, overdoses, arrests and treatment numbers.

This year data collected across Australia suggests that the availability of heroin is stable, as is the price of the drug. Last year the IDRS reported that some users appeared to have left the heroin market due to the shortage of the drug in 2001 and there was the belief that some of these users may have not returned to heroin use. The results of this year's research suggest that those who have remained in the market may be using a range of other drugs including pharmaceutical preparations. However, the use of these preparations appears to be greatest in areas where the heroin supply is traditionally low, particularly the Northern Territory and Tasmania.

Dr Louisa Degenhardt from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of NSW, and Chief Investigator of the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS), believes this trend of the injection of pharmaceuticals is an issue that requires future monitoring.

“This year there are some jurisdictional differences, particularly in relation to the types of diverted pharmaceutical preparations that IDU are injecting,” said Dr Degenhardt. “This practice may be associated with significant harm for these users, and there is a need to look into the provision of harm reduction messages and treatment for this group.”

“Morphine injection was most common in the NT and Tasmania, with increasing proportions reporting injection in the ACT. WA and Tasmania reported significant numbers of pharmaceutical stimulant injection among their IDU population” said Dr Degenhardt.

The availability and use of crystal methamphetamine has also increased around the country among injecting drug users.

In addition the 2003 IDRS found that the number of IDU reporting recent cocaine use decreased across Australia, most notably in NSW. The frequency of cocaine use decreased among IDU in NSW and remained relatively uncommon and infrequent in all other jurisdictions.

The National Co-ordinator for the IDRS, Ms Courtney Breen believes that the IDRS continues to provide valuable information on current drug trends across Australia.

“The major benefit of the IDRS is that we can now detect new drug trends as they are emerging – it provides an early warning for governments, law enforcement and health workers,” said Ms Breen. “Without a system designed to detect new trends, we are always playing catch-up with problems associated with drug use.”

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