National Trends in Ecstasy and Related Drug Markets around Australia

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INTRODUCTION

Given the recent reported decrease in availability of MDMA internationally [1] the aim of this paper is to assess the impact of that decrease in the Australian MDMA/ecstasy market. Data were obtained from a sentinel group of regular consumers of MDMA (regular ecstasy users; REU). This paper also explores to what extent this change in the ecstasy / MDMA market has impacted on other related illicit substance markets (e.g. methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis) in relation to use, price, purity and availability.

METHODS

The Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) is Australia's leading monitoring system in providing sensitive information on use trends, market characteristics, harms associated with use and information on new substances in the club drug scene. Data are collected annually through quantitative methods of interviewing REU (N=756 in 2009) and using national indicator data sources (e.g. customs data, hospital admissions). Qualitative methods are also utilized by interviewing key experts in the law and health fields who have knowledge of (dealers/users) these substances. Methods analysis for continuous, normally distributed variables used *t*-tests and means were reported. Where continuous variables were skewed, medians were reported and the Mann-Whitney *U*-test, a non-parametric analogue of the *t*-test [2], was employed. Categorical variables were analyzed using χ^2.

RESULTS

Ecstasy has significantly decreased in preference for REU in relation to drug of choice (52% in 2003 *vs* 42% in 2009, 95% CI 0.148, 0.049, *p<0.001*,), concurrently, alcohol has significantly increased in preference (3% in 2003 *vs* 15% in 2009, 95% CI -0.106, -0.06, *p<0.05*) over the time period 2003 and 2009. Decrease in purity and availability of ecstasy has been reported by REU. Other national data sources have also reported this decrease with the number of MDMA detections at the Australian border having decreased by over 50%, from 116

in 2007-2008 to 55 in 2008-2009 [3]. The number and weight of MDMA border detections are the lowest recorded in the last decade. Interestingly, despite a lack of availability and current demand, there has been a decrease reported in median price of ecstasy tablets (between $3-10) across all states except the Northern Territory and Tasmania in 2009. Changes in the REU ecstasy/MDMA market have occurred alongside changes in polydrug use of REU in related substance markets. There was a significant decrease in reported crystal methamphetamine use from 2008-2009, in this sample. Yet an increase in recent cannabis use (76% in 2008 *vs* 82% in 2009, 95% CI-0.0254, -0.1099; *p=0.002*) was seen nationally. Increases in cocaine seizures at the national border [3] and at a state (New South Wales) arrest use/possession level [4], have been mirrored by significant increases in cocaine use in New South Wales and Queensland. Other niche drugs (such as amyl nitrate and methadrone) in the ecstasy and related drugs (ERDs) scene have also experienced reported significant increases in use.

DISCUSSION

The results would suggest a changing trend in drug use preferences, frequency of use and practices of the 'regular ecstasy user'. There still appears to be a demand for MDMA, however, given the lack of purity and thus, decrease in positive effects of the drug, REU have anecdotally reported experimenting with other substances. The lack of MDMA availability reported by larger indicator data sources interestingly was not a prevalent finding in the 2009 EDRS study.

CONCLUSIONS

The Australian ecstasy and related drugs market is a dynamic market, emphasizing the continued need to conduct regular monitoring of use patterns and harms through systems such as the EDRS.

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