

## Press release 2008

### Rise in Ketamine Use Amongst Young People

Ketamine use appears to be increasing among young people worldwide, particularly within the electronic dance music scene, according to new research.

Academics at the Universities of Bath and Lancaster see the findings as evidence of a “continued desire for altered states of intoxication by at least some groups within society” despite the “persistence of prohibition”. Ketamine was recently classified as a Class C substance in the UK – its use was not illegal until 1 January 2006.

Dr Karenza Moore, Lecturer in Criminology at Lancaster University, one of the editors of the special issue said: “Since classification British users report little or no change in price, availability, patterns of use, nor their perceptions of ketamine, leading us to question the deterrent value of current British drug policy”.

This adds to growing concern amongst experts over the UK government’s drug policy, particularly its persistent belief in the deterrent value of the ABC classification system, evident in recent moves to reclassify cannabis to Class B.

In addition, the academics criticise the UK government for criminalising ketamine use without providing harm minimisation information of relevance to young party-goers, particularly given the dangers associated with using ketamine in combination with alcohol.

Their research is the focus of a special issue of the journal *‘Addiction Research and Theory’* on ketamine use in the UK, Europe and the US. Published this week, it will be the first international collection of papers of its kind. Ketamine was originally developed in the 1960s as an anaesthetic and is still used by the veterinary and medical professions. However it is also taken recreationally. Whilst usage in the general population remains low, indications are that ketamine use is increasing amongst young people from all socio-economic backgrounds: including students, those in full time employment, young professionals and particular cultural groups such as clubbers and members of the free party scene.

Both cheap and easily available, ketamine is thought to be enjoyed by young people due to its short lasting, mildly hallucinogenic properties. Users regard ketamine as safer and more easily controlled than LSD, ‘magic’ mushrooms or other hallucinogenic drugs; and cheaper and more fun but less addictive than cocaine. A user in one of the studies, ‘Carl’, described it as “the most fun you can have for twenty quid”.

Users usually consume ketamine by snorting lines of the white powder into the nasal passage to be absorbed by mucous membranes in a similar manner to cocaine. First time ketamine use by some of those interviewed was due to mistakenly thinking they had been offered cocaine powder rather than ketamine powder, leading to confusion and in a minority of cases, distress.

Researchers found ketamine is increasingly popular among older and more experienced recreational drug users who tend towards polydrug use: taking more than one drug either consecutively or concurrently with other drugs such as ecstasy, cocaine and cannabis for their combined effects. For many users ketamine is part of these ‘weekend polydrug repertoires’ during a night out, with ecstasy and cocaine taken in clubs and ketamine use favoured alongside cannabis in post-club settings.

Despite the hedonism associated with such weekend polydrug use, researchers found ketamine was usually consumed in a relatively safe and sensible manner, in small quantities on an occasional basis, at chill-out parties after leaving dance clubs, where users felt more able to control the environment and reduce the likelihood of negative experiences.

Amongst women, however, there was concern that taking ketamine might make some women more vulnerable than when under the influence of other popular illicit drugs such as ecstasy and cocaine.

Within the British free party scene, the effects of ketamine were seen to diminish the collective and communal experiences of dance events, enhanced by ecstasy. For some non users of ketamine, there was irritation or resentment at people taking ketamine in public social settings then needing to be 'looked after', due to their intoxicated state.

Increased ketamine use is also evident in the USA and Hong Kong. In Hong Kong ketamine has replaced ecstasy as the most popular illicit drug to be consumed in clubs.

Edited by academics from Bath and Lancaster Universities, this international and multidisciplinary collection of papers is devoted to the social and cultural uses of ketamine. Based on seven studies in the UK, the USA and Hong Kong, combining criminological, sociological and psychological research with contemporary cultural analysis and first hand accounts, it is believed to be the most comprehensive overview of ketamine use to date.

Overall, the 7 studies included in the special issue highlight the diversity of practices and meanings about ketamine – both in terms of how it is consumed and the kinds of groups that consume it.

The editors are Professor Christine Griffin (Bath University), Dr Fiona Measham (Lancaster University), Dr Karenza Moore (Lancaster University), Dr Yvette Morey (Bath University) and Dr Sarah Riley (Bath University).