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The British
Psychological Society

New psychoactive substances ("Legal Highs")

British Psychological Society response to the
National Assembly for Wales's Health and Social
Care Committee consultation

September 2014

About the Society

The British Psychological Society, incorporated by Royal Charter, is the learned and professional body for psychologists in the United Kingdom. We are a registered charity with a total membership of just over 50,000.

Under its Royal Charter, the objective of the British Psychological Society is "to promote the advancement and diffusion of the knowledge of psychology pure and applied and especially to promote the efficiency and usefulness of members by setting up a high standard of professional education and knowledge". We are committed to providing and disseminating evidence-based expertise and advice, engaging with policy and decision makers, and promoting the highest standards in learning and teaching, professional practice and research.

The British Psychological Society is an examining body granting certificates and diplomas in specialist areas of professional applied psychology.

Publication and Queries

We are content for our response, as well as our name and address, to be made public. We are also content for the Committee to contact us in the future in relation to this consultation response. Please direct all queries to:-

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This response was led for the British Psychological Society by:

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We hope you find our comments useful.



David J Murphy CPsychol
Chair, Professional Practice Board



Mary Clare O'Connell
Chair, Wales Branch

New psychoactive substances ("legal highs")

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The Committee will consider the following areas as part of its inquiry:

How to raise awareness of the harms associated with the use of legal highs among the public and those working in the relevant public services.

Comments:

Wales currently benefits from the information provided through the Welsh Emerging Drugs and Identification of Novel Substances (WEDINOS). This is a website which provides quarterly, up to date information on new substances. The Society recommends working with this agency to provide additional information across a wider forum to include hospitals and schools as well as other public and voluntary sector agencies. These substances are often referred to as 'recreational drugs' and by this term there is an immediate implication of safety and less potent substances. In reality, many have not been tested and there is no information about the long term mental and physical health problems associated with their use. More recently, services have attempted to improve the spread of what knowledge there is via social media outlets and this is potentially an effective way of communicating to the largest using age group which appears to be between 20-34 years (WEDINOS, 2014). Because of the commonplace nature of acquiring these substances and the recreational label, many do not consider the possibility that they may at some point; require help in managing their use (NHS National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse, 2012). We believe that it is important to consider these factors in any increase in awareness as they are seen as the 'legal' and less harmful option.

The Society believes there is a need for committed funding to develop projects which address partnership working; the development of treatment approaches and harms reduction techniques specifically for legal highs. Funding for educational projects across schools, universities, GP surgeries and prisons as well as for the dissemination of information once it becomes available would also be useful. We believe that consideration should be given to the use of social media outlets as part of this. Currently there are no identified drug services for users under the age of 16 and this may need to be addressed in the context of legal highs which are currently growing in popularity amongst this younger age group (Luxembourg Publications Office of the European Union, 2014).

The capacity of local services across Wales to raise awareness of – and deal with the impact of – the harms associated with the use of legal highs.

Comments:

Information from the NTA would suggest that the use of club drugs is rising and it is important that services are developed to meet the need for this (NHS National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse, 2012). At a time when many statutory services are being dismantled in favour of voluntary sector agencies, it is important that street agencies have the correct information in order to keep service users safe. Hospitals are seeing a rise in presentations of both physical and mental health problems which appear to be directly related to the use of legal highs (Advisory Council on Misuse of Drugs, 2013) and information about these possible effects must be communicated to the relevant health services. Locally and nationally there are anecdotal reports of service users combining the use of Class A drugs such as heroin with legal highs (WEDINOS:

Philtre Bulletin, issue 3, 2014). There is little understanding of the effects of using a combination of these drugs both in terms of physical or mental health and there needs to be an awareness of these issues across agencies.

The effectiveness of data collection and reporting on the use of legal highs in Wales and their effects.

Comments:

Information obtained through WEDINOS appears to be thorough and provides information relating to geographical patterns of use, demographics as well as the new and emerging chemical names of those drugs tested. This provides an anonymous means of reporting data across various sites in Wales. Promotion of this service would be useful in order to obtain as much data as possible. Because of the variations and changes in chemical make-up, little is known about what compounds are more or less dangerous and the short term versus long term changes associated with using them. The Society believes that there needs to be much more information about these both in terms of physical and mental health effects.

The possible legislative approaches to tackling the issue of legal highs, at both Welsh Government and UK Government level.

Comments:

Currently, 'legal highs' are being classified as illegal as they appear to give rise to other similar drugs with slightly altered chemical properties. As such, governments and agencies working with substance users are constantly trying to play 'catch up' with regard to the changed compounds. There are risks associated with a complete ban in that users will be driven away from the more visible sellers into an illegal market. Other countries have considered the development of a 'licensed seller' system and there is some evidence to suggest that numbers of people buying from these have not increased and admissions to A&E have decreased as a result.

How effectively a partnership approach to tackling the issue of legal highs in Wales is being coordinated, both within Wales and between the Welsh and UK Governments.

Comments:

The Society believes that this is something which needs to be developed more. There are legislative differences between services in England and Wales which have sometimes impeded partnership working. This is an area about which we still know very little and the importance of cross working must be emphasised.

International evidence on approaches taken to legal highs in other countries.

Comments:

There is disagreement between the UK and some European countries as to the way to manage the increasing use of legal highs. The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) have considered the use of a European Early Warning System (Luxembourg

Publications Office of the European Union, 2014) which alerts agencies to the supply of legal highs which are considered most harmful and there has been a commitment to remove the most dangerous compounds from public use as quickly as possible (within 10 months). Consideration has also been paid to regulating the less harmful compounds, some of which are considered to have 'legitimate use'. However, this approach has been regarded as hindering the UK's decision to control the use of new and emerging legal psychoactive substances. In 2011, the UK developed a Forensic Early Warning System (DrugScope, 2014) which similarly identifies the any 'legal highs' coming on to the market. But there is, within UK, a commitment to ban rather than regulate substances. There is some evidence from New Zealand (APPG for Drug Policy Reform, 2013) who have adopted the regulation route, that the number of compounds now sold on the market have dropped from between three and four hundred to 100 and the number of outlets selling these compounds have also reduced through a system of 'self regulation' with many of the 'head shops' deciding against selling regulated products. The services in New Zealand further support this decision as, when faced with people entering the healthcare system following reactions to substances, there is now a clearer knowledge of what people have ingested. However, it is of note that New Zealand is again considering a complete ban on NPS. The Society believes that a detailed analysis of the different approaches to dealing with new psychoactive substances should be considered.

References:

Advisory Council on Misuse of Drugs (2013) *Ketamine: A Review of use and harm:*

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/264677/ACMD_ketamine_report_dec13.pdf

All-Party Parliamentary Group for Drug Policy Reform (2013) *Towards a safer drug policy; Challenges and opportunities arising from legal highs:*

<http://www.law.qmul.ac.uk/docs/research/90672.pdf>

DrugScope on behalf of the Recovery Partnership (2014) *Business as usual? A status report on new psychoactive substances (NPS) and 'club drugs' in the UK*

<http://www.drugscope.org.uk/Resources/Drugscope/Documents/PDF/Policy/BusinessAsUsual.pdf>

Luxembourg Publications Office of the European Union (2014) *EMCDDA: European Drug Report; Trends and developments*

http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/attachements.cfm/att_228272_EN_TDAT14001ENN.pdf

NHS National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse (2012) *Club Drugs: Emerging Trends and Risks:* <http://www.nta.nhs.uk/uploads/clubdrugsreport2012%5B0%5D.pdf>

Welsh Emerging Drugs and Identification of Novel Substances (2014) *Philtre bulletin, Issue 3:*

http://www.wedinos.org/resources/downloads/Philtre_Issue_3.pdf

Welsh Emerging Drugs and Identification of Novel Substances (WEDINOS) website, (2014):

<http://www.wedinos.org/>

End.