

JT News

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****Dallas area faces serious problem
from legal designer drugs

DALLAS -- Anyone who has passed an elementary chemistry course could make a lot of money. As long as he had no moral objections, he could design drugs for profit. Unfortunately, too many "fly-by-night" pharmacists and illicit chemists are following the get-rich-quick scheme. And people are dying.

Dr. Robert Bost, chief toxicologist of the Southwestern Institute of Forensic Sciences at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas, believes they represent a serious and continuing problem for the Dallas area.

Compared to national figures, the abuse in Dallas seems unexpectedly high. These drugs originated in California a few years before arriving in Dallas, yet Dallas has produced five deaths while California has reported only one.

Bost speculates that Dallas could be a test market for designer drugs. "Dallas may be a central area where Eve and Ecstasy are being tested. There are a number of illicit amphetamine synthesis operations in the Dallas area that easily could have switched from producing amphetamines to Ecstasy and Eve. Of course, I can only speculate that Dallas may have been chosen as a trial area."

Apparently there are people, whether from one large operation or many individual entrepreneurs, who are ready and willing to play with the drug recipes in the Dallas area. Bost says, "We know that Ecstasy and Eve were widely used in Dallas from 1985 to 1986 because we saw the drugs come through our laboratories. Five people between the ages of 18 and 32 have been victims of designer-drug-related deaths." Bost and two other investigators reported on the five deaths in the Mar. 27, 1987, issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association.

"Furthermore, we have had four patients admitted to Parkland Memorial Hospital for reasons not related to the drug and have found the drug in their systems. We have also found the drug in seven D.W.I. cases. It is being abused in Dallas," Bost says.

Lieutenant David M. Davis Jr. of the Drug Abuse Section of the Dallas Police Department agrees that Dallas has an unusually high number of designer drug users. "Dallas, Houston, San Francisco and Los Angeles are major Ecstasy and Eve consumer areas. We don't know why these cities have large populations of designer drug users, but there seems to be one common thread: all of these cities have a large gay population concentrated in one central area. Most Ecstasy and Eve is found, sold and consumed in a part of the city popular to the gay community. This doesn't mean that all homosexuals take designer drugs, but there is a preference among gay drug users for those drugs.

"In Dallas the primary place we find designer drugs is the Oak Lawn area. When Ecstasy was legal, there were several shops in the area openly advertising that designer drugs were available. Basically anyone could walk in and buy a dose," Davis says. "There is not a 'typical' user. They can be in high school or out of college, from North Dallas or Oak Cliff, heterosexual or homosexual."

Designer drugs like Ecstasy and Eve are easy to make, easy to sell and, because of loopholes in the law, legal for unpredictable periods of time.

Ecstasy (MDMA) and Eve (MDEA) are the products of minor substitutions or rearrangements in the chemical structure of the currently prescribed drugs amphetamine and methamphetamine, commonly called speed. Although these slight molecular changes do not necessarily alter the action of the parent drug, technically and legally they create new drugs.

(More)

While it is illegal to possess amphetamines or methamphetamines without a physician's prescription, designer drugs are legal to possess in Texas until they are expressly listed as controlled substances in the Texas Controlled Substances Act. It sometimes takes less than a week to create a new drug and years to produce enough evidence to ban its use.

Dr. Elizabeth Todd, chief of regulated substances at the Southwestern Institute of Forensic Sciences says, "A serious danger may exist in the new chemical composition of the drug. No one can predict what biological responses will result from even a slight change in chemical structure."

The effects can, in some cases, be deadly. In 1982 underground chemists attempted to synthesize a drug similar to Demerol (meperidine). They created MPTP, a toxin causing brain destruction similar to that found in Parkinson's disease. Unfortunately their research animals were not little white mice; they were humans -- street drug users. Todd says, "These unlawful drug manufacturers do not subject new drugs to safety tests. The first test is the first user."

In the early '80s illicit chemists designed a legal drug, Ecstasy (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine) by altering the molecular composition of methamphetamine, a controlled substance. The number of users soared, because of a marketing effort not unlike that employed to sell designer clothes. Eventually drug officials recognized the abuse potential of Ecstasy and classified it as a controlled substance. Within months the illicit market had formulated a chemical cousin, Eve (3,4-methylenedioxyethamphetamine), which today remains a non-controlled yet nearly identical substitute.

Bost says that it is not difficult to design a drug. "Any chemist can take a basic molecular structure, make minor chemical changes and come up with a different compound," he says. "In the case of Ecstasy, someone experimented with the chemical composition of methamphetamine and found that, by rearranging one side group, he could produce a drug that had similar effects yet was legal. It is not difficult to switch from amphetamines or methamphetamines to Ecstasy or Eve; it is just a simple change."

If a fly-by-night pharmacist with simple tools and a limited background in chemistry can reverse the legality of dangerous street drugs, why haven't illicit chemists created synthetic equivalents of all illegal drugs? Bost says designer drugs may be limited to amphetamines and methamphetamines for the time being simply because it is relatively easy to alter the chemical composition of stimulants without changing the desired psychoactive effects.

In theory, however, any drug can be manipulated. "It is possible to change the chemical composition of almost any drug. The effects of the new substance may be either similar to or completely different from the parent drug. The designed drug may be toxic, like MPTP. We have no way of predicting what biological consequences will result from small molecular changes," Todd says.

Bost explains that, once the new "recipe" is created, it can be duplicated by virtually anyone. "It does not take an experienced chemist to carry out the process of making the drug. The only requirements are the instructions and ingredients."

There is an obvious problem in Dallas with designer drugs. They are relatively simple to make and sell. The manufacturers are basically "home free" due to the legal loopholes. For the illicit chemist, it is all too easy. But for the users, it is all too dangerous because the chemical composition of carbon-copy illegal drugs can be at best, a unknown substance, and at worst, deadly.

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NOTE: The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and the School of Allied Health Sciences.