

HEART AND SOUL OF THE PARTY?

COCAINE
Cocaine is a highly addictive stimulant with powerful but short-lived effects. It generally makes users feel awake, confident and heart beat faster and can cause convulsions or heart failure. Healthy young people can have a fit or heart attack after taking cocaine.

ALCOHOL
Over the years, heavy alcohol consumption and acceptably become an integral part of the dangers of binge drinking have begun to be widely recognized. Current government advice on sensitive drinking recommends do not exceeding 2-3 units per day for women, 3-4 units for men.

COCAETHYLENE
Using cocaine and alcohol together is becoming 'normal' for more young people on a big night out. Yet the majority of these people are blissfully unaware of a chemical reaction that takes place in the body when these two drugs are mixed together. Cocaethylene is the nasty substance in question, and is more harmful than either drug taken independently of each other, so in effect it's a double whammy. And its bad news for that wonderful body of yours!

FACTS
Cocaethylene is highly toxic substance that has serious physical and psychological side effects. This is not a way too small to get at the gory medical details across, we've done our best but if you want more information try "googling" Cocaethylene, it's quite an eye-opener.
It takes twice as long for cocaethylene to leave your system as it does cocaine.
There is 21 times the risk of sudden death when cocaine and alcohol are taken together.

PERSONAL SAFETY
Being on the streets when under the influence puts you at greater risk of physical or sexual assault.
While under the influence you may appear to be threatening others, influencing how they react to you.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR
It's becoming more common to use Viagra to combat 'drivers droop' which increases the strain on your heart see further.

EFFECTS OF COCAETHYLENE
ON THE HEART
Chest pain, Respiratory failure, Sudden death (increased by 21-25 times), Stroke, Decrease / Complete, Irregular heart beat, Heart failure, Decreased heart rate, Compromised functioning of the autonomic system.

ON THE BRAIN
Convulsions, Poor judgement, Loss of sense of time, Increased mental and physical stress, Emotional disturbance, Excess stress and fatigue, Impaired ability to learn, Increased aggression, Increased anxiety, Increased paranoia, Anxiety and panic, Depression, Panic attacks, Unstable blood pressure, Impaired judgement, Increased aggression, Increased anxiety.

WINNER NATIONAL FRANK AWARDS DRUG CAMPAIGN OF THE YEAR 2009

COCAINE + ALCOHOL = COCAETHYLENE

Cocaine and alcohol are both harmful, but combine them and you have the toxic double whammy of cocaethylene. **David Gilliver** hears how this year's FRANK award winners have been raising awareness among young people in Nottingham

‘When people buy ice cream they look to see how many calories are in it first, but when it comes to cocaine people just assume everything’s kosher,’ says Stephen Youdell of the Nottingham Crime and Drugs Partnership (CDP). ‘The truth is it could be cut with anything, and often is. People are very trusting when they’re buying drugs.’

Last year the CDP mounted a major campaign in partnership with students from Nottingham Trent University to alert young people in the area to the risks associated with cocaine. Not only did Heart and soul of the party go down well with students and clubbers, but judges for the 2009 FRANK stakeholder awards – impressed with the campaign’s creative, innovative and youth-led approach – awarded it first prize. How did it feel to win? ‘We were really, really pleased because there was quite a lot involved,’ says Stephen Youdell. ‘I think the campaign spoke for itself. From when we first started working with the students, the feedback was universally good – on the design, the subject matter and the fact that it had some humour in it.’

Each year the CDP runs a health promotion campaign on a subject related to alcohol, drugs or crime with students from the university, providing a grant of up to £1,000. ‘What’s in it for us is we can then take it outside the university, with some slight changes to make it more relevant for other young people’s settings,’ he says.

While it covered issues like the unknown substances drugs can be cut with, and the wider impact of the cocaine trade, the campaign decided to make its main focus the serious – but little known among the general public – subject of cocaethylene, the highly toxic compound formed in the body when cocaine and alcohol are mixed. Cocaethylene takes twice as long for the body to process than alcohol alone, increasing the risk of liver damage.

The CDP began by canvassing the students’ attitudes to cocaine, and asking if they’d heard of cocaethylene. ‘The answer was overwhelmingly no,’ he says. ‘The majority of people who take cocaine will be drinking – maybe heavily, as cocaine often facilitates binge drinking – so cocaethylene is a double whammy they don’t know anything about.’

The CDP formed a project team with eight final year environmental health students and a designer, while the partnership’s drugs service offered advice on how to communicate with drug users. While CDPs often work with universities around issues like noise and binge drinking, many are failing to take advantage of huge potential resources, he says.

‘If you look at the range of courses that universities offer there’ll be media, photography and health courses. By us investing a relatively small amount of money we had eight people’s imagination, energy and commitment – 95 per cent of the work was done by the students and we got a product very much targeted at young people, where historically it’s difficult to get harm reduction messages to young people.’

The students were delighted with winning, he says. ‘They’ve got that on their CV but it’s not the fact that you get a trophy and a home office minister coming down, it’s that they’ve invested so much time and creativity and it’s been recognised.’

The campaign featured leaflets, posters and calendars, all pitching their message in a way designed to resonate with this target group, as well as pointing people in the direction of support services. ‘If you start talking to young people who are drinking too much about liver cancer you’ve lost them, because in their minds that’s just so far down the line,’ he says. ‘But if you talk about getting into debt or relationship problems or underachieving at college – things they can relate to earlier – it seems to hit the spot. The campaign does talk in some medical terms but more often than not it’s talking about day-to-day things.’

The first step was to produce a poster for fresher’s week that depicts a student’s experimentation with cocaine that becomes more problematic throughout the year. ‘Students love posters so we produced the calendars in A3 and shifted hundreds’ he says. ‘It’s a bit tongue in cheek but the aim was something we could give away. At fresher’s you’ve got the big banks giving away memory sticks and things like that, which we can’t compete with, so this is something cheap and cheerful.’

The initial print run of posters ran out and an extra 500 had to be printed. Following excellent feedback from the students, the CDP’s drug outreach service then took the campaign outside of the college boundaries, targeting bars and clubs around Nottingham. The campaign also mounted a large display at the

national alcohol conference in Nottingham and presented at regional FRANK roadshows, and there has been significant interest from agencies further afield.

‘Other areas have asked if they could use the resources so we knew it had an appeal broader than Nottingham,’ he says. ‘Hopefully by being a national winner more people will be able to adopt the leaflets and other merchandise for their own use. Anyone can have it for free – all they have to do is change the logos and helpline numbers and pay for it to be printed. It’s just sharing best practice.’

Students have always experimented with drugs but 20 years ago cocaine use was relatively unheard of on college campuses. Did the team get the impression that it’s now a fixture of college life? ‘What we do know is that cocaine use in general has significantly risen in both the female and male population, and we think it’s fair to assume that it’s gone up among students as well. We do have some evidence that students are accessing debt counselling services and saying that cocaine is the reason. This isn’t to say Nottingham Trent University has got a horrendous problem with cocaine, because it hasn’t – but we do know cocaine is out there, it’s cheaper than it’s ever been and the quality is as low as it’s ever been.’

Was there any sense that the university authorities were reluctant to get involved in the campaign, for fear it might give the wrong impression? ‘They were completely on board,’ he says. ‘We’ve done previous campaigns, including a binge drinking campaign, and we have to be honest in that students come to university – many living on their own for the first time – and they have drinks promotions thrust in their faces, peer pressure to take drugs, all the rest of it. This is about trying to empower young people, so the university was right behind it.’

The campaign’s overall intention – alongside alerting people to the dangers of cocaethylene – was to deglamourise the drug for its target audience. ‘The reality is that you’re in some khazi, snorting cocaine, hiding from the bouncers, and it’s really not very glamorous. It’s a grubby drug and its impact on the user and the people around them can be catastrophic. This isn’t about telling people what they should and shouldn’t be doing – it’s about offering information and provoking debate, producing information to help change attitudes and behaviour.’

‘Young people experiment with drugs, whether it’s a rite of passage or whatever,’ he continues. ‘People have to make their minds up – at no point in our leaflets does it say “you shouldn’t take cocaine”. The fact is that drugs meet people’s needs – this campaign is trying to understand what’s in it for the user as well. If the first time people took cocaine it made them feel terrible no one would take it, so it’s very much about trying to strike a balance and hopefully this has. Certainly the feedback is that it did.’

The campaign also touches on the issue FRANK’s national cocaine campaign tried to address last year (*DDN*, 2 June 2008, page 5) – the effect the trade has on people and communities worldwide. ‘If people think all they’re doing is buying a cheeky gram for a Friday night, they’re not,’ he says. ‘Towns across the world have been decimated by the cocaine industry, but one of the problems is that after the third pint or glass of wine people’s social conscience isn’t at the forefront of their minds. That’s why we’re tackling the other side of it, saying “you’re not a film star – you might think you are but you’re not, and this is what you actually look like”. When you boil it all down it’s not actually that attractive.’

Another major issue, of course, is that, while provision of stimulant services has been on the increase, treatment overall remains resolutely weighted in favour of heroin. Youdell is convinced that the needs of stimulant users are often going unmet.

‘I think sometimes professionals hide behind the drug the individual’s taking,’ he says. ‘There’s a person in front of you with a dependency on a substance, and some substances you can treat more readily with medication. Ultimately you need to look beyond the drug at the person, and I think the needs of people with stimulant dependency are in some ways far greater because there’s not really a medical intervention that can help them while things get sorted out.’

‘As well as those presenting for treatment, you’ve also got people taking powdered cocaine in a real binge pattern. They’re having very heavy weekends, recovering for a week, a fortnight or a month, and thinking they don’t need treatment because they’re not taking it every day and they still have a job. But if that pattern continues jobs do start suffering, finances suffer, relationships suffer terribly and you have men over 40 having heart attacks and dying. There’s a lot of it that goes under the radar.’

If you’d like copies of the Heart and soul of the party material contact stephen.youdell@nottinghamcity.gov.uk