

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY**WRITTEN QUESTION**

Ms J Carney

to Minister for Family and Community Services

Ecstasy Use By Children, Survey

1. Minister earlier this year you had fliers displayed in the Darwin area inviting people, including children aged as young as 16 to volunteer to be interviewed about their ecstasy use and to be paid \$30 for their time:
 - a. Is it not the case that by paying \$30 you are providing money which could well be used to purchase more drugs by these young people?
 - b. why did you not use something like movie passes?
 - c. how reliable do you think any findings of this survey will be, given that anyone could make up an ecstasy story to get the loot?
 - d. how many people have been paid \$30? How many were 16, 17?

ANSWER

The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) consists of two research projects. The Injecting Drug Users (IDU) survey and the Party Drug Initiative (PDI). Both are national studies funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and coordinated by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and both use the same methodology.

The IDRS IDU commenced a trial of the methodology in New South Wales in 1996. After the successful piloting of the methodology, it was expanded to three states (NSW, VIC and SA) in 1997 and has been conducted nationally, including in the Northern Territory since 2000.

In 2000/01 the IDRS was expanded to include the Party Drug Initiative (PDI) to monitor ecstasy and related drugs (ERDs) markets in Australia. ERDs cover a range of drugs including ecstasy, methamphetamine, cocaine, GHB and ketamine. In 2000/01 a trial was conducted, funded by the National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund) to assess the feasibility of monitoring ERDs markets. The research was conducted in NSW, QLD and SA. The trial concluded that it was feasible to monitor these markets and in 2003 funding was granted to expand the study to monitor ERDs markets in every State and Territory across Australia.

There is currently no other system in place in Australia to monitor trends in ecstasy and related drug markets. It has been established as a unique data source on a relatively hidden population. The methodology includes interviewing a sentinel group of ecstasy and related drug users defined by their regular ecstasy, interviewing Key Experts (KE) people that have contact with party drug users through their employment and collation of indicator data such as accident and emergency statistics and purity of seizures will also be analysed.

As well as providing the only data from ecstasy and other drug users on these drug markets in a timely manner, the project uses existing data sources to integrate available information in an attempt to provide the best picture possible of various party drug markets across the country.

Overall the PDI provides information on patterns of party drug use, the harms associated and information on the price, purity and availability of ecstasy (MDMA) and related drugs. These drugs are associated with both acute and long term harms, yet many users do not come to the obvious attention of treatment providers or law enforcement personnel.

- a. Accessing Ecstasy and other related drug users group can be difficult since they are not readily accessible from such agencies as treatment providers or needle and syringe programs, as is the case for the existing IDRS. Furthermore, although involved in illegal activities, they generally do not come into contact with law enforcement personnel. Party drug users are recruited through advertising in entertainment magazines and shops, are screened over the phone and then individual interviews are scheduled.

People participating in the ecstasy user interviews are reimbursed \$30 for time and travel costs incurred by their participation in the study. As with the main IDRS, this study targets a hidden population and participant payment broadens the sample by obtaining interviews from people that may not otherwise be accessed. Payment is an established practice in the drug and alcohol field in Australia and internationally. Payment of participants has occurred in Australia since the 1980s and has occurred in the IDRS in NSW since 1996 and nationally, including in the NT since 2000.

Studies show that participation in research into illicit drugs is rarely motivated by economic gain alone and given the relatively small size of the payment and the confidentiality provisions that apply payment in this instance is considered acceptable (Fry and Dwyer 2001).

In the current year 74 percent of participants stated they used money from paid employment to purchase their ecstasy and 35 percent used Government Allowances (Centrelink payments).

- b. The PDI is conducted in the capital city of each State and Territory using a methodology developed by NDARC and applied identically in each location to ensure comparability of results. Individual jurisdictions cannot change the methodology or content of the study which is why we cannot 'use something like movie passes' to reimburse participants for the time and travel costs incurred by their participation in the study.
- c. To examine the reliability of the findings, NDLERF funded a two year trial of the feasibility of monitoring party drug use in NSW and QLD, using the existing IDRS methodology in 2000/01. The trial concluded that it was feasible to monitor party drug use and that important information from this monitoring system was generated in the form of information about price, purity and availability of a range of drugs, emerging trends in drug use among regular party drug users and information on patterns of use over time among this group. Monitoring patterns of use and the associated harms is important to provide further information on the effect drug use has on individuals and the community.

The two year PDI national trial has shown that ecstasy and other drug markets can be adequately assessed in all states and territories using this methodology. The national PDI has provided jurisdiction specific information as well as informing us of the similarities and differences between jurisdictions. The benefits of monitoring drug markets over time has been demonstrated by the IDRS and the continuation of this data collection is likely to also show significant benefits.

The party drugs feasibility trial was conducted to determine whether the methodology proposed would be successful in monitoring ecstasy and other related drug markets. The trial found that the results of the quantitative survey of regular ecstasy users validated the choice of this population as the appropriate sentinel group to examine party drug markets.

- d. In 2003, 104 Regular Ecstasy Users (REU's) participated in the survey, none were 16 years and only one was 17 years old. In 2004, there were 74 REU's, three were 16 years old and four were 17 years old. In the current year there were 86 REU's who participated in the survey, none were 16 years old and five were 17 years old.

Ethical concerns such as age of participants are covered in ethics applications each year. Ethics approval for the study is granted nationally every year by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee and jurisdictionally by the relevant bodies. In the Northern Territory the Top End Human Research Ethics Committee of Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services and Menzies School of Health Research has granted approval for this study to be conducted in Darwin.