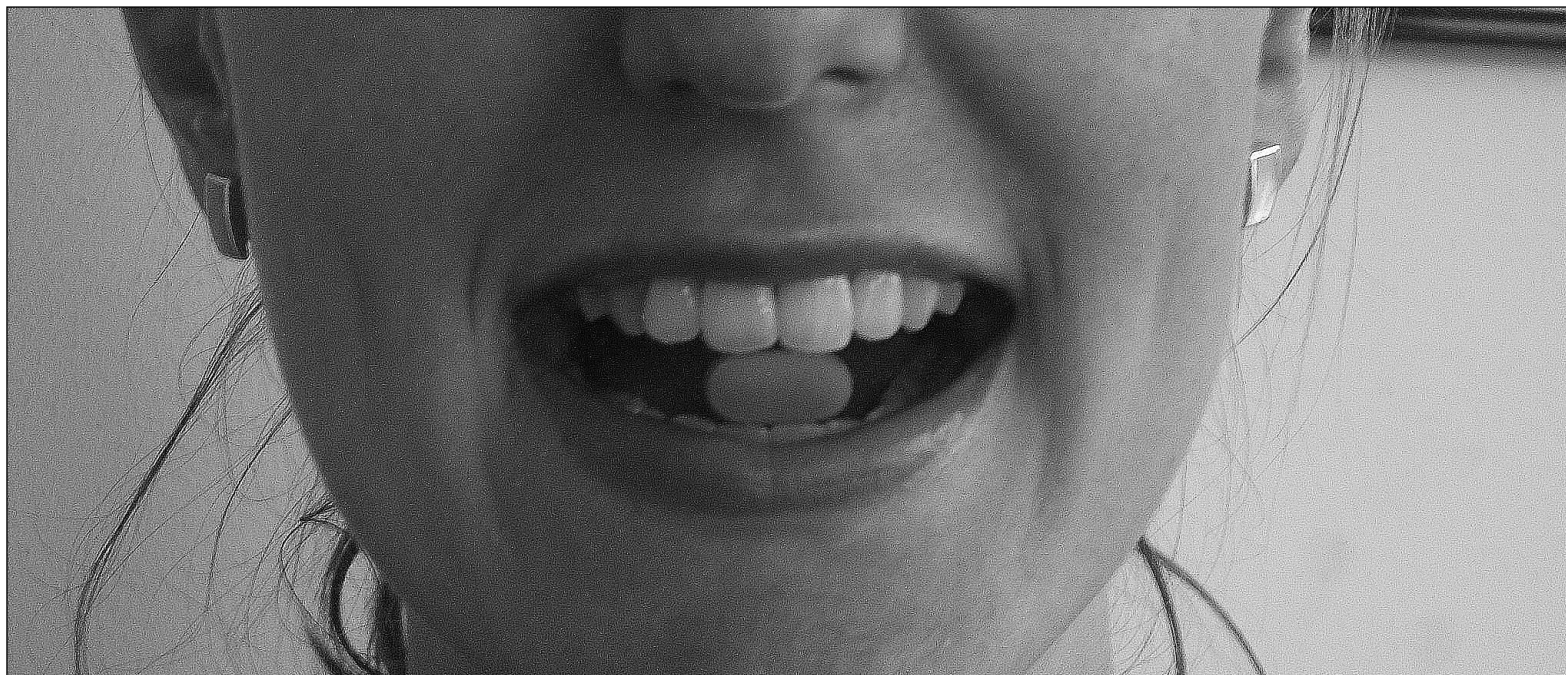


Party pills demonised in public eye

Continuing negative coverage by the media has led to a real misconception, say suppliers, as JUSTINE GLUCINA reports.



PHOTOS: HELEN TWOSE

HIGH TIMES: Party pills have become a popular alternative to class A drugs.

Recent negative coverage of party pills has led to public perceptions of the substances as harmful, says a source at Auckland's leading party pill company.

Sales manager for Energy Products, Aidan Uttinger, says this has led the way for those who oppose party pills to push for a total ban.

"There's a real misperception about party pills, they've been unfairly demonised because they are in a pill. In fact, they are a lower risk than alcohol and tobacco".

The main ingredient in party pills is BZP (benzylpiperazine). Marketed under names such as Jump, Silver Bullet, Dark Angel and X, the pills are designed to stimulate the central nervous system to induce feelings of euphoria, wakefulness and confidence for up to eight hours.

Some Canterbury health workers have suggested that BZP-based party pills should be banned after recent increases in hospital admissions relating to the substance.

Uttinger says the events in Christchurch are the result of a few unscrupulous distributors selling large amounts of pure BZP in unlabelled plastic bags.

"The negative coverage focussed on the events in Christchurch and is not representative of the industry as a whole".

"Certainly they have been demonised and communities are concerned about party pills..."

Matt Bowden, a pioneer for party pills in New Zealand and chair of Social Tonics Association of New Zealand (STANZ), says some of the pills sold in Christchurch contain five times the industry's recommended dosage of 200mg per serve.

STANZ represents the manufacturers, marketers and retailers of party pills, and promotes the establishment of a regulatory market.

"Some of the bags in Christchurch contain 2000mg of BZP, and you have to work out how to use it yourself – by snorting or with a spoon," says Bowden.

Uttinger says some of the distributors in Christchurch are selling pills containing 500mg of BZP per capsule, and encouraging customers to take unsafe amounts.

"No reporter has yet delved deep enough to uncover why hospital admissions have risen in Christchurch. Ninety per cent of all admissions happen in Christchurch, and it's because these individual distributors fall below STANZ regulations," he says.

In 2004, Auckland had a total of 23 hospital admissions relating to BZP. In comparison, Christchurch had 10 per week – 70 times the number of admissions per capita.

Ross Bell, executive director of the National Drug Foundation – a non-government organisation committed to minimising drug-related harm – does not accept that party pills are a safe alternative to illegal drugs, but agrees that party pills have had unfair treatment in the media.

"Certainly they have been demonised and communities are concerned about party pills, and the media has shone the spotlight on party pills."

Uttinger says the pills sold by Energy Products are in line with STANZ regulations.

"One of our party pills contains 75mg of BZP per one capsule, and it clearly says how many you should take."

STANZ believes the events in Christchurch are "not sufficient grounds for banning or restricting access to a responsibly marketed product".

"The way forward is to regulate the environment to manage risk and social responsibility issues," says Bowden.

The Ministry of Health supports a regulated system.

Moreover, in 2002 New Zealand's Expert Advisory Committee on Drugs (EACD) found no grounds to ban BZP after conducting investigations into its effects.

Bell supports the EACD decision to introduce regulations, as a ban would be ineffective and "wouldn't control the problem".

The Misuse of Drugs Act 2000 states that social tonics containing BZP are of such a low risk that they fall below the criteria for classifying them as Class A,

B or C drugs.

Instead, they created a fourth class for low-risk substances, which includes other substances such as caffeine.

"People who use harder drugs will generally turn to party pills because they are a smarter alternative."

"Categorising them as Class D – a low risk substance – is an innovative way to try and deal with drug issues," says Bell.

STANZ has already been suc-

cessful in restricting the sale of party pills to those 18 years and older.

The association set up a voluntary code of practice that includes a 'risk classification schedule' imposing a mandatory dosage limit, as well as warning signs on packaging.

"One of the things with an unregulated market is that it always pursues saturation. Normal laws of social responsibility are ignored," says Mr Bowden.

He says if party pills are banned it could force people into illegal drugs, as well as pushing BZP onto the black market as another uncontrolled product.

The EACD agrees, claiming that: "Restricting access to the products that contain BZP may lead to users of these products seeking more harmful controlled drugs as substitutes for BZP".

Party pills were introduced into New Zealand by Bowden six years ago as a safer alternative to illegal drugs, or a substitute for methamphetamine.

The Community Alcohol and Drug Services (CADS) website says "there is a common misperception that party pills containing BZP are "natural" or

"Party pills are not a priority issue. Alcohol and tobacco are the areas we have to focus on."

"herbal" and are therefore safe, regardless of how many you take. People take many times the recommended dose in the hope it will give greater effects".

The ADANZ councillor says people who use harder drugs will generally turn to party pills because they are easier to get and cheaper, not because they are a smarter alternative.

"This is just keeping them in the same lifestyle, rather than helping them break the cycle. If people wanted to get off drugs, they would go into detox, they

wouldn't turn to this weaker form of drug," says the ADANZ counsellor.

Dr Chris Wilkins, researcher at Massey University's Centre for Social and Health Outcomes Research Evaluation, conducted a survey of frequent methamphetamine users in Auckland, as well as those already in treatment centres.

Findings showed that methamphetamine users liked BZP as it had the same effect, but without the risks.

It also showed that New Zealand now has an oversupply of methamphetamine.

Bowden believes the decrease in demand for methamphetamine is a direct result of party pills.

However, Bell says there is no evidence that illegal drug use is on the decline because of party pills.

"It appears that the evidence shows that BZP is a low risk substance. But in no way do I accept that party pills are a good alternative to illegal drugs. This is a myth that Matt Bowden always pushes and there's no evidence to back it up," he says.

Despite this, Bell believes the Government should be concentrating on other substances over party pills.

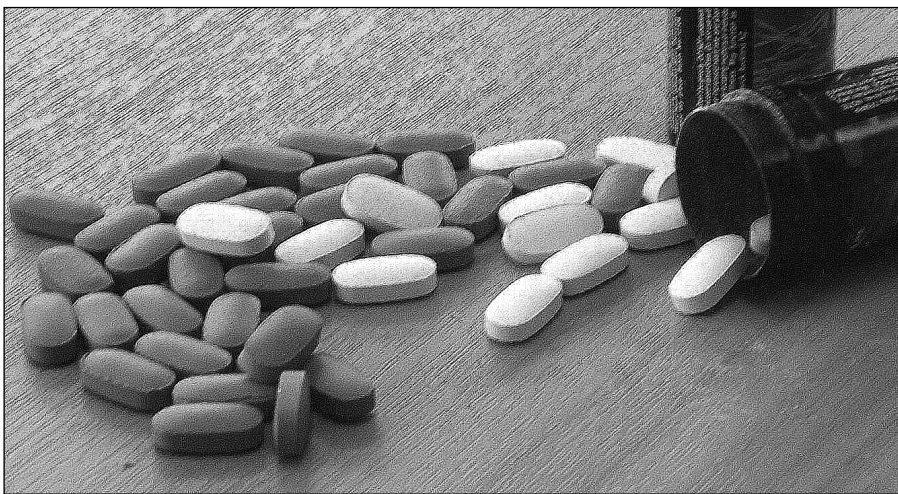
"Party pills are not a priority issue. Alcohol and tobacco are the areas we have to focus on."

New Zealand has around 1400 alcohol-related deaths per year, and 4700 related to tobacco. In comparison, the STANZ website says 7-8 million BZP based products have been sold in New Zealand over the last five years. Not one single death anywhere has been attributed to BZP, the organisation says.

Bowden says one of the biggest misconceptions stems from the 2004 ban of BZP in America. He questions the evidence the US Drug Enforcement Administration (USDEA) used to support their ban, saying the USDEA overestimated its potency as being worse than crystal methamphetamine.

"Despite the New Zealand Government pointing out the mathematical error, the USDEA upheld the ban," says Bowden.

Yet the USDEA report is still widely used as ammunition for those opposing party pills, claiming it is evidence of harm caused by BZP.



DRUG OF CHOICE: A smarter alternative?