

Party pills turn on more Kiwis

By ANNA CHALMERS - The Dominion Post | Monday, 12 November 2007

In less than three years, party pills have become one of New Zealand's most commonly used drugs.

Massey University data made public at the Cutting Edge addiction conference in Auckland last week showed use of BZP-based pills, which are soon likely to be made illegal, was nearly level with cannabis use in 2006.

"Drug use has changed quite a lot in New Zealand," Chris Wilkins, a senior drug researcher at Massey University's Social and Health Outcomes Research and Evaluation Centre, said.

"There's more illegal drugs around and we've got this new drug - BZP - which is hugely, commonly used and it just came from nowhere."

A 2006 national household survey found party pills rated just behind cannabis in annual usage rates.

"In 2003 we didn't even survey (BZP), but in 2006 it's become the fourth-most-popular drug."

A comparison of 2006 data with previous drug survey results showed that alcohol use had increased since 1998, while cannabis and tobacco-use rates had fallen.

This was probably linked with regulation, Dr Wilkins said. Liquor sales laws had been relaxed and the legal drinking age had been lowered. Tobacco controls had been tightened with price increases and legislation introduced outlawing its use indoors in public places, he said. "There seems to be some correlation between stricter regulation and lower levels of use."

There were now also strong negative social connotations linked with smoking, he said. Efforts to contain use of methamphetamine, known as P, had paid off with amphetamine use rates falling since a peak in 2001. But amphetamine use was still high by international standards and today's users were likely to be more problematic, he said. "What we end up with now is the real entrenched, dependent users, whereas the middle-class users have moved off."

WHAT IS BZP?

Active ingredient: benzylpiperazine (BZP) and/or trifluorophenylmethylpiperazine (TFMPP). Effect: BZP is similar to low-

strength amphetamine, improving energy. Often used to 'dance all night'. TFMPP reported to have similar effects to ecstasy. About 20 million pills sold in New Zealand since 2000. Reported side-effects range from mood problems and anxiety attacks to seizures. BZP was originally formulated as an animal worming agent. When mixed with TFMPP it helps mimic the effect of ecstasy. What is its legal status?: A bill to ban BZP passed its first reading in Parliament in September and is now before the health select committee. The bill, which has strong support in Parliament, would make BZP and related party pills class 1 drugs, making people caught possessing them liable to a maximum of three months' imprisonment and/or a fine of up to \$500.