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Pushing the boundaries



IT SOUNDS TOO GOOD to be legal. Or safe. A pill that lets you “push the boundaries and enjoy a mind-altering experience with all the energy to match”. That promises to deliver “feelings of intense happiness sweeping over (you) from head to toe”.

Since November last year, pills making these very claims have been sold openly in bottle stores and tobacconists around the country. They are commonly known as party pills, and manufacturers claim they are a safe, non-addictive alternative to alcohol and illegal drugs, as long as you are over 18 and follow the directions on the pack.

The main active ingredient is the compound benzylpiperazine (BZP) which targets the same serotonin receptors in the brain as Ecstasy and amphetamines, and produces similar effects. BZP has already been banned in the US, Australia, the UK, Japan, Denmark and Sweden, and is heading for a similar fate in New Zealand, birthplace of the party pill. The legal status of the drug in South Africa is unclear. Although the Medicines Control Council (MCC) has declared BZP “undesirable”, it has yet to make any firm ruling on its legality.

The party pills available in South Africa are distributed by Hard Out Distributions, which says it has registered the product as a complementary medicine. The company provided *noseweek* with copies of their applications for registration, but no evidence that these had been successful. The MCC was unable to confirm or deny Hard Out’s claims. Hard Out director Vashti Leachman said her company had followed all the legal requirements “to a T”, but had “voluntarily” stopped importing the product from New Zealand pending clarification from the MCC.

The company has also been hit by a warning issued recently by a Cape Town laboratory, Drug Testing Africa, which claims urine tests on three party pill users came up positive for amphetamine and methamphetamine, known locally as tik. The distributors have threatened to take Drug Testing Africa to court over the allegations.

“Our pills are made under strict conditions in a government-approved facility in New Zealand and each batch is rigorously tested,” Leachman said. “It’s common for BZP to produce false positives for amphetamines. But there is nothing illegal in our product.” She said research had shown that party pills were safe, and were being used as an alternative to hard drugs and drink. “They are a drug-harm minimization solution. They are non-addictive, and safe if used properly.”

Some studies seem to bear this out. Research conducted in 2006 by Massey University in Auckland found that a third of people who had taken both party pills and illegal drugs in the previous year had given up the banned substances completely. Of those who still took illegal drugs, 45% preferred to take party pills.

A comparative risk analysis by the independent Consumer Link organisation produced less dramatic figures, but still found that up to 10% of users had given up or reduced their consumption of alcohol and illegal drugs as a result of the pills. The authors concluded that party pills produce fewer adverse health effects than alcohol, are less likely to result in physical injury, provoke aggressive behaviour or cause traffic accidents, and create far fewer issues of dependency or loss of control. It found no evidence that BZP acted as a

“gateway” to harder drugs.

Since they first went on sale in 2000, party pills have become the fourth most popular drug in New Zealand after alcohol, tobacco and cannabis. The Massey University survey found that 20% of 13-to 45-year-olds had tried them.

Although New Zealanders consume party pills at a rate of 200 000 a month, there have been few reported cases of severe reactions, although there have been a small number of hospital presentations for agitation, vomiting, seizures, heart palpitations and possible kidney damage.

The only death to be associated with BZP anywhere in the world is that of a Swiss woman who combined the drug with Ecstasy. Consuming the pills with other drugs seems to present the biggest danger.

The packaging for Hard Out’s A-Class Party Pills is quite clear on the risks. “WARNING: THESE PILLS HAVE VERY STRONG EFFECTS”, it says in big letters.

“DO NOT MIX WITH LARGE AMOUNTS OF ALCOHOL.”

In smaller letters, however, it says “DO NOT consume alcohol”. It also says: “DO NOT mix with any medicines, drugs or other products containing BZP. DO NOT underestimate the powerful effects. DO NOT exceed stated dose.”

Unfortunately, not everyone reads labels or follows their advice. Various studies in New Zealand suggest that up to 30% of users don’t even look at the instructions, half of them take more than the recommended dose and two-thirds have mixed the pills with alcohol. There is also evidence that some children as young as 14 are taking BZP.

In South Africa, while selling the pills through liquor outlets may offer some protection to children, it doesn’t exactly reinforce the no-drinking recommendation. But is banning the way to go?

The man who discovered the potential of BZP and developed the first party pill is adamant that it’s not. In the late 1990s, Matthew Bowden was a crystal meth addict. Desperate to kick the habit that was killing him, he asked a neuropharmacologist to help him find a safe substitute. They came up with piperazine, a compound which seemed to offer all the joys of speed and E, but without the nasty side-effects, including the possibility of arrest.

Bowden weaned himself off meth, and is now a successful businessman with his own party pill manufacturing and marketing company. He is also chairman of the BZP advocacy group Social Tonics Association of New Zealand (STANZ).

He says the research proves that “party pills are serving their purpose as a safer, legal alternative to illegal drugs”.

STANZ supports the strict regulation of BZP and claims that if the drug is forced underground, it will be far more difficult to monitor and control.

Party pills are clearly not harmless. They cause dangerous reactions in some individuals and the hangover has been described as “like 24-hour flu”. Experts also have no idea what the long-term effects could be. Without further research, it’s impossible to assess whether BZP is a potential ally in the war on drugs, or an agent for the other side.

Unfortunately, in the current climate of drug-hysteria, clear thinking and calm judgment are in short supply. So get your party pill hangover now, while stocks last.