

## Half a million Americans use methamphetamine every week

Bob Roehr *Washington*

An estimated 12.3 million Americans, or 5% of the adult population, have used methamphetamine at least once, claims a US expert on substance misuse. He also says an estimated 600 000 people are weekly users of the drug.

Alex Kral, of the non-profit scientific research and develop-

ment group RTI International, was speaking at the first US national conference on methamphetamine, HIV, and hepatitis, held in Salt Lake City, Utah, last month. The conference brought together medical providers, social services, and law enforcement agencies in a bid to address the widespread misuse of the drug.



A police sergeant in protective gear with chemicals seized in a raid on a Tennessee methamphetamine laboratory

Methamphetamine, which is also known as meth, crystal, ice, speed, and "Tina," has been linked with risky sexual behaviour and with a more rapid progression of the symptoms of AIDS.

Some have dubbed current use of the drug in the United States an "epidemic," but the drug historian Patricia Case, of Harvard University, has described it as another "outbreak" within a pattern of endemic use.

Methamphetamine releases high concentrations of the neurotransmitter dopamine in the brain, inducing a sense of energy and wellbeing. Despite the increasing restriction of its use, the drug is relatively cheap and easy to produce in home "labs," which has helped drive the current wave of illegal use, she said.

Dr Case has traced the use of this particular class of drugs over the decades. Bazedrine, an amphetamine introduced in the United States as an over the counter nasal spray in 1932, was widely used in pill form by all military forces in World War II and was included in soldiers' field kits. In recent years modafinil (Provigil), a similar stimulant approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 1998, was used by US military personnel in Iraq.

Although many people use

methamphetamine regularly and maintain normal social functioning, it can become addictive, said Dr Kral. He said that from 1992 to 2002 admissions to drug treatment facilities for misuse of the drug increased from 10 to 52 per 100 000 people. Recovery can be difficult for heavy users, because it can take a year or more for dopamine concentrations to return to normal. Worldwide the number of users is estimated at 35 million, he added, citing data from the World Health Organization.

The drug was marketed to US women in the 1950s and 1960s as an antidepressant and weight loss agent, and women now make up 42% of admissions to emergency care for its use—significantly more than for other misused drugs.

Few hard data are available on which treatments are most effective, but behavioural techniques used for cocaine addiction seem to work well for methamphetamine addiction.

Methamphetamine misuse does not seem to be a major problem in the United Kingdom, but a survey by London's City University in 2004 found that around one in five gay men in the capital had used the drug at least once. □

## Chronic pain is poorly managed

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

A fifth of adults in Europe have moderate to severe chronic pain, and in many cases their symptoms are inadequately managed, says a recent study.

Only one in 50 cases are managed by a pain specialist, and a third of patients are not currently being treated, says the study in the *European Journal of Pain*, published online on 10 August ([www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com), doi: 10.1016/j.ejpain.2005.06.009).

"We have documented that chronic pain is a major health care problem in Europe," wrote the authors, from the University of Oslo, Rikshospitalet University Hospital, Oslo, University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust, and Mundipharma International, Cambridge. "This needs to be taken more seriously by health care providers and those respon-

sible for health care policies and allocations of resources."

The study was based on a computer assisted telephone survey that was designed to explore the prevalence, severity, treatment, and effect of chronic pain in 15 European countries and Israel. Almost 50 000 people took part, and screening interviews identified 4839 people with chronic pain for further, in-depth interviews.

The results show that 19% (9500) of the adults surveyed had moderate to severe chronic pain, seriously affecting their daily activities and their social and working lives. The prevalence of such pain varied from 12% in Spain and 13% in the United Kingdom and Ireland to 26% in Italy, 27% in Poland, and 30% in Norway. Arthritis was the most common reason given for pain. The back was the most common location for pain.

The interviews with the 4839 respondents with chronic pain showed that 66% reported moderate pain, 34% reported severe

pain, 46% reported constant pain, and 54% reported intermittent pain. Fifty nine per cent had had pain for 2 to 15 years, 21% had been given a diagnosis of depression because of their pain, 61% were less able or unable to work outside the home, 19% had lost their job, and 13% had changed jobs because of their pain.

Forty per cent of those with long lasting or recurring pain (a different category from chronic pain) reported that their pain was not managed well. The percentage of people whose pain wasn't managed well varied markedly among the countries: from 27% to 29% in Finland, the UK, Ireland, and Germany, 40% to 45% in Israel, Italy, Norway, and Sweden, and 54% to 61% in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark.

Although 23% of these respondents had at some time been to a pain specialist, only 2% were managed by such a specialist. "This suggests that specialist pain services are unavailable to a

majority of chronic pain sufferers who could have benefited from specialised care," the authors wrote.

The results also show that 28% of respondents with pain thought that their doctor did not know how to control their pain. More than 60% of people currently using prescription drugs for their pain said the drugs were sometimes inadequate.

A third of the people with chronic pain were currently not being treated. Of the two thirds who used alternative treatments, 30% used massage, 21% used physical therapy, and 13% used acupuncture.

Two thirds of those with chronic pain were taking prescription drugs, including non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (44%), weak opioids (23%), paracetamol (18%), cyclooxygenase-2 inhibitors (6%) and strong opioids (5%).

Mundipharma International, who funded the survey, is seeking licences for various drugs, including analgesics. □