

New psychoactive substances: looking back; moving forward.

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The early 2000s in New Zealand saw the emergence of previously little known psychoactive substances being sold unregulated. Initially known as ‘herbal highs’, and containing certain piperazines such as benzylpiperazine, they were almost entirely synthetic, and rapidly became popular in the dance party scene. Similar scenarios played out in other countries with the UK experiencing the popularity of synthetic cathinones such as mephedrone. Countries started to prohibit these substances; however, as quickly as they were banned new substances emerged onto the market, with a recent trend being that of the synthetic cannabinoids.

In the last 5 years, attempts at more sophisticated responses to new psychoactive substances (NPS), have developed, the most unique amongst these being New Zealand’s New Psychoactive Substances Act 2013. The Act allows the ‘industry’, in principle, to submit evidence of ‘low risk of harm’ of a product they wish to market. A positive assessment of this evidence could mean the product could be approved for sale.

In addition to concerns about regulating the supply of NPS, other issues challenge the field. Attempts to reduce harm from NPS use, and to offer treatment to those who experience problematic use, are hampered by a lack of knowledge about the substances, their ingredients, mechanisms of action, toxicity and side effects.

The lack of local, co-ordinated and comprehensive early warning systems is also problematic – such systems could provide alerts about new products and new and emerging risks profiles of these products. Furthermore, in an environment where information on NPS and their availability are not hampered by geographical boundaries, new challenges and opportunities arise.

In this presentation I will look back over these three areas of regulation, harm reduction and monitoring in order to second guess the future. I will use New Zealand’s experience as an example, whilst drawing on international experiences.