

They are legal so they are safe, right? What did the legal status of BZP-party pills mean to young people in New Zealand?

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Abstract

Background: The legislation on psychoactive substances has a role to play with regard to shaping social values and influencing the normalisation of drug use. In New Zealand from 2005 to 2008, benzylpiperazine-containing 'legal' party pills (BZP-party pills) were legally available for purchase, subject to controls around a minimum purchase age of 18 years, and prohibitions on free of charge distribution and advertising in certain media. This paper explores what their legal status communicated to young users.
Methods: Interviews and group discussions with young people (n=58) who had used BZP-party pills in the preceding 6 months.
Results: Data were collected between June and December 2006 via a series of interviews with individuals, 'friendship' pairs, and groups comprised of participants known to each other. Young people saw BZP-party pills as 'safe' and of good quality as they were legal/government sanctioned, but also thus of inferior strength, suggesting they could take more of them. However, after using them they often reviewed their view of their safety and quality due to varied experiences. Being legal for some people meant they could use the substances without breaking the law, or having to go to 'dealers'. Their legal status also meant they were easily accessible and were seen to be 'socially acceptable', with some young people indicating they would be happy to discuss their use with their parents. However, social acceptability was, for some, a reason not to use them.
Conclusion: These data provide a unique insight into the tension between positive and negative harm reduction messages relating to the legal nature of psychoactive drugs and as such begin to fill an information void in this area. The legal status of these 'party pills' conveys mixed messages to young people and whilst being seen as potentially safe and of good quality, this often leads to higher than 'recommended' doses being used. Nevertheless, not breaking the law or having to access BZP-party pills from 'dealers', and being able to discuss their use with their parents are all potentially positive harm reduction issues.

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