

Transcript

The disturbing effects of salvia and other legal highs can be found easily on YouTube and other video showing websites. Due to this rise in popularity and profile of legal highs and the controversy around drugs such as salvia and piperazine I thought I'd try to find out how easy they are to get hold of and also what controls are in place to regulate their use.

Salvia and other herbal drugs are incredibly popular and the legal high industry is worth millions worldwide. Britain is seen as a hub for these drugs not only in head shops but also online. Just by taking a walk at Camden High Street here in North London and I've come back with a whole range of legal highs they include everything from the organic extracts of salvia which we've seen having effects on people earlier and this one which is piperazine in a capsule with some caffeine is labeled super-e. It's all range of things, so we've seen what this stuff can do to you, so how are shopkeepers able to sell you this stuff legally? Well, speaking to them, it's interesting the number of legal loopholes they'd jump through, for example the salvia here is quite clearly has a description on the back of who uses this stuff, and how this spiritual lore about mescaline dins but right at the bottom it actually just says: "not for human consumption" so it's a toy effectively and it's the same with the piperazine, this actually it says in the back here 'novelty plant food only not for human consumption' so essentially when you take it out from the shops it's up to you what you do with it, you can put it on your plants, you can just have it as a novelty plant extract or you can take it as a drug.

Having bought all that so easily I wanted to find out more about how we classify drugs in Britain, I went to see Colin Blakemore, he's been looking into drugs and their impact on individuals and society.

- How are drugs classified at the moment?
- Well, in this country they are classified by the well known A, B and C system introduced in the Misuse of Drugs Act in 1961, the problem is that the A, B, C system is being used politically, is being used to send messages and that to some extent I think is responsible for the reluctance to change the classification of drugs, particularly to downgrade drugs, because of the concern that it seems to send a message to young people, that it's okay to use a drug because it's gone from let's say B to C. So we want to devise a system which is flexible, which could be reviewed regularly, and it shouldn't have this sharp divisions. So we've thought of all the ways in which drugs can harm people and harm society and came up with 9 different categories of harm: 3 of them harm to the individual, 3 to do with addiction and 3 concerned with effects on society. We asked groups of experts to look at a large number of different drugs including legal drugs and for each of those 9 categories, to give a number between 0 and 5 and we then just added together all of those individual scores to come up with one combined overall estimate of harm. That then allowed us to rank the drugs from heroin and cocaine at the very top down to ecstasy and LSD at the bottom with alcohol and tobacco quite high up on that range.
- Would you place the legally available drugs on this scale as well?

- They would be merit in extending the classification, if something like our system were adopted to all drugs that are abused that have psychoactive actions. And indeed the ranking that was produced for such legal drugs might be a guide as to when it was considered serious enough that those drugs should be made illegal.

To classify or evaluate a drug like salvia, we need to know what's in it. At S George's Hospital I met John Ramsey, he is one of the people behind TICTAC a database for the visual identification of drugs.

- So this is some salvia we bought in Camden High Street just today, this is a salvia ten times organic extract. Is this the kind of thing you would have on the database, and how would you search for it on there?
- Yes, we do have it on the database and we can just type in the name.
- So we found it there?
- Yes, we can look up the active ingredient, tells you what salvia is, it tells it's a herb, it's an abused drug, it's not controlled by the Misuse of Drugs Act in the UK
- We saw some youtube clips earlier of people apparently taking salvia and they were kind of going a bit crazy, I mean, is that the kind of thing that you'd expect?
- It's difficult to say that I'd expect anything really, because our knowledge about this drug is confined almost to the information you are quoting, you know we get our information from users' experiences, and of course the problem is that they don't really know what they're taking.
- Well, it's very clever to make this new products and get them sent to you, you've no idea what they are doing to people, surely
- Absolutely, I mean the pharmaceutical industry spends ten hundred million pounds or more on toxicologically testing new compounds on animals long before ever gets ... considers even giving them to people experimentally. Whereas these people are really experimenting continued
- That's quite so frightening considering they are all called herbal highs
- Absolutely, they call them herbal highs to make them sound safe and cuddly I suppose

Salvia and drugs like it are marketed as herbal highs, a safe alternative, but we have no idea what's really in them. Judging by what I've found out maybe we should be regulating them.

Perhaps is the classification system itself that needs attention cause as it stands it doesn't seem to provide much protection or guidance against any drugs, legal or illegal