

Dancing with death

A number of much-publicised deaths have helped turn ecstasy into the demon drug of the 1990s in the popular imagination. **Tim Malyon** argues for a more constructive approach

On 16 February this year Sheriff Neil Gow QC announced the results of his fatal accident inquiry into the deaths of three youths at the Hanger 13 nightclub in Ayr. "A dance with ecstasy can lead to a dance with death," he concluded in the last line of his report.

Such lurid language is itself a health hazard, a stupid soundbite reinforcing drug users' legitimate cynicism about any illicit drug use health warnings, genuine or otherwise. According to Dr John Henry, of the National Poison Unit, around 25 people a year die from ecstasy-related causes. To put this into context, surveys suggest that somewhere between one and five million people have tried ecstasy (MDMA). Tens and possibly hundreds of thousands use it every weekend. In comparison, total sports-related deaths in the UK in 1992, the most recent year for which figures are

available, numbered 148.

Sheriff Gow's report fails to mention one curious fact: that death related to ecstasy use is a phenomenon peculiar almost exclusively to the UK. In the US, a "drugs early warning system" lists the hundred most dangerous drugs according to hospital admissions. "Ecstasy has never been on that list," affirms writer Nicholas Saunders, author of the excellent book *E for Ecstasy*. "Until recently, deaths due to ecstasy were a British problem." The problem is even more specific than that, according to Dr John Henry. "In my experience, almost all the victims had been to an event at a commercial venue."

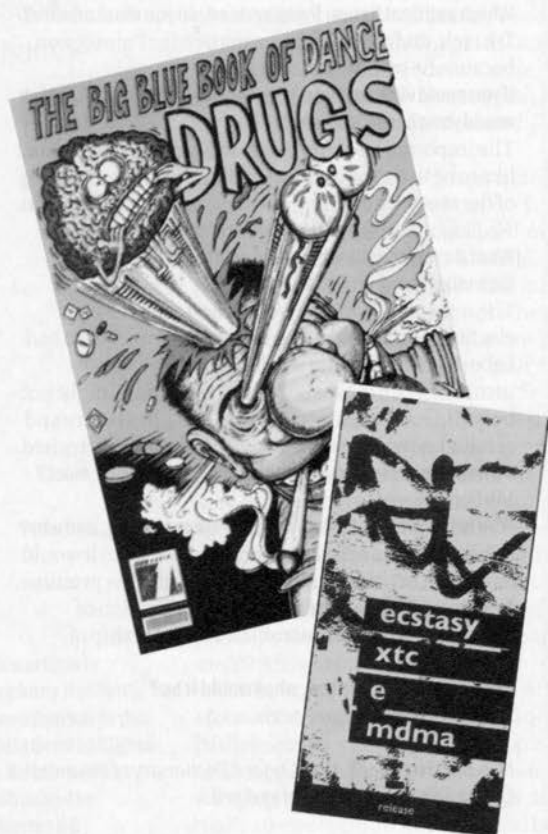
Henry studied ecstasy-related deaths in the UK between 1990-1991. Heatstroke was the cause in every case. Dancing hard and failing to drink in a tropical-temperature nightclub can be lethal, on ecstasy or amphetamines, both of which can raise body temperature. So easy availability of free water is a safety "must" at any dance event. Even knowing this, some commercial club owners still pack dancers into criminally hot, cramped spaces; charge up to £2 for a small bottle of water; turn off tap water in the toilets to increase bar sales; and provide no quiet "chill-out" areas. According to editor Sheryl Garrett, *The Face* magazine has refused advertising and any mention in editorial copy of one such operator, London's Club UK, as a result of this practice. "They turned the water off and the heating was on full blast," she says.

The idiocy here is mind-boggling. The Metropolitan Police "club squad" raids clubs, including Club UK, for suspected drug use, but pays no attention to safety issues such as the availability of water. Environmental health officers are hardly ever to be seen at commercial clubs, yet are often called out by police in the middle of the night to unlicensed free or community parties to check sound levels. Yet the press persists in routinely attaching the adjective "dangerous" to unlicensed parties when their safety record is generally far better than licensed clubs. Unlicensed parties also face the full onslaught of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act. The act does not affect clubs.

There is an undisputed need to clean up the cowboys in the commercial club scene wherever cash counts for more than lives. Manchester has been in the forefront of seeking a solution. The Lifeline Project, organised in conjunction with the city council and partly funded by the government's Drugs Prevention Initiative, established a Safer Dancing Campaign in order to persuade club owners to behave responsibly. Lifeline has published a series of user-friendly information leaflets on dance drugs such as ecstasy and amphetamines. And researcher Dr Russell Newcombe has published *Safer Dancing: guidelines for good practice*. This advises club owners on matters such as free water, decent rest areas, proper ventilation and searches at the door. Licences may be revoked if guidelines are not followed. Lifeline outreach workers have also been active in some of the city clubs, and the council runs a training and licensing scheme for doormen.

Lifeline recently organised the First International Safer Dancing Conference. Safer dancing is partly about the reduction of possible drug-related harm. Nicholas Saunders and psychiatrist Dr John Merrill took part in a panel discussion at the conference that focused attention on long-term effects of ecstasy use. The drug destroys nerve cells in animals. Yet studies comparing human ecstasy users with non-users have found no behaviour differences, save that ecstasy users "were less likely to be aggressive without cause", according to Saunders. John Merrill added: "So far we have no evidence that nerve cell deaths, which I believe are happening, are causing noticeable damage." But for all the pious cant about protecting young people, nobody is allowed to investigate this matter properly on real human beings taking real drugs, rather than monkeys in cages. "Nobody will sponsor such research. And you wouldn't get a licence, you wouldn't be allowed to do it," concluded Merrill. Saunders' advice to users is simple, but sound: "It's a great mistake to take too much too often." One and a half pills seems to be the recommended max-

Safe suggestions: rather than demonising drugs and users, Release's pamphlet on ecstasy (foreground) and the BBC's Big Blue Book offer practical advice



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imum.

But a pill is a pill, contents unknown if bought on the illicit market. After a series of police raids dried up the ecstasy market some four years ago, the country was flooded with "snowballs"—tablets with a high dosage of the much more harmful MDA, although few people realised this at the time. The pills, according to Saunders, came from a government-owned laboratory in Latvia. They caused very unpleasant reactions in some people (MDA is reckoned to be ten times more toxic than MDMA).

It couldn't have happened in Holland, where the Amsterdam-based Adviseburo Drugs tests drugs, in particular dance drugs such as ecstasy. Users, producers and dealers send them pills, which are laboratory tested for strength and impurities.

"The first people to be interested are the dealers and producers," Herman Matser, of Adviseburo, reported to the Manchester conference. "They sometimes sell the pills with our analysis. It's important to test many different pills, and also to keep on testing the same pills." Adviseburo builds up a reference sheet of what pills are available, their contents, and how they look. Working in the larger clubs, Adviseburo is passed pills and matches them with its reference sheet of pills already tested to give a detailed analysis.

Matser was asked whether the service was legal. "I don't think so. They give me a prohibited pill, and I give it back to them. But we never have problems with the police." The main problems involved high doses as well as heart-disease tablets, amphetamines, MDA, MDEA and LSD all being sold as ecstasy.

In the UK there's no such service in operation, although the drugs advice agency Release tried it some 15 years ago, providing information about current street drugs by answerphone. The *News of the World* dubbed it a "junkie hotline" and the GPO cut the phonenumber.

Nicholas Saunders is now operating his own limited testing scheme using friends of friends to send in pills direct to an authorised laboratory. The test results can be read on the Internet: <http://www.cityscape.co.uk/users/bt22/>. Please do not send any pills.

Support for testing emerged from an unlikely quarter at the Manchester conference. "We need drug testing because we've got dirty drugs on the street and we don't know the contents," explained Inspector Ron Clarke of Greater Manchester Police, stressing that this was his personal opinion. Clarke was equally outspoken on the whole issue of drugs and the law. "Basically, prohibition has failed," he stated bluntly. "We've got to

look at licensing as the only way we can police drugs, whether it's someone smoking cannabis or heroin. There's no control whatsoever on drugs now. With licensing, there's control and revenue for the government."

Unfortunately, licences—for whatever purpose—don't always mean control. Licences for commercial dance clubs can be free-market vouchers to print money rather than means of providing safer dance environments. Licences for community, free or traveller dances barely exist. In these cases they are a cover for prohibition, not control.

Festival Welfare Services (FWS) provides services similar to the Safer Dancing Campaign for free parties and festivals such as the Hackney Homeless Festival, and for larger commercial open-air events like Glastonbury, Reading and the Phoenix festivals. FWS has also given advice on protracted licensing disputes in recent years. Coordinator Penny Mellor, is concerned that many free or community dance events stand little chance

**"We need drug testing because we've got dirty drugs on the street and we don't know the contents"
—Inspector Ron Clarke**

of obtaining licences this summer, regardless of their intentions, and will be stopped by police using powers under the new Criminal Justice Act—a classic Catch-22.

"Councils should license events without imposing ridiculous conditions," Mellor told NSS. "Licence fees should not be so outrageous. And police costs should not be used as a means of deterring events." Thames Valley Police quoted £50,000 last year for policing a one-night charity event for 5,000 people. The district council fee just to consider the licence application was £5,000, non-refundable if the licence was refused.

Now FWS, founded in 1974 and the only organisation of its kind in the country, has had its annual grant refused by the Home Office, which has been funding the Safer Dancing Campaign. "We're having to look at redundancies and closing the office next week," commented Penny Mellor. It's hard to escape the conclusion that the government wants dancers in cleaned-up licensed clubs so that the current crackdown on community parties and free events can continue undisturbed.

However, that's not what its own Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs recommended in a recent report. "We recommend that the organisation of more

legal raves be encouraged by local authorities exercising maximum discretion in the granting of licences and by involving responsible organisers of raves in the process," it urged. The report specifically mentions FWS's role as a negotiator in facilitating "minimum standards of public safety and security". It's time for drug projects and their umbrella body, the Standing Conference on Drug Abuse, to speak out against FWS's threatened closure.

Across large tracts of the country, there are few clubs. And many people cannot afford club entrances fees of £8 and upwards. So local dance organisations have developed, often highly responsible and organised. Around Exeter alone, for instance, there is Lazy House, Speak-Eazzy, Tribal Rage, Fun Factory and Disciples of Rhythm. The south-west was also home to the legendary traveller collective, Circus Warp, closed down by heavy policing. Many community squats, too, such as Cool Tan Arts in Brixton, also put on events.

"Dance is one of the most positive things youth culture has," according to Claran O'Hagan, Lifeline outreach worker. This is particularly true of community parties, which can provide a focus for youthful energy in areas where there is often little decent employment and few leisure activities available. Community centres, funded by dances along the lines suggested by the Exodus Collective in Luton, could transform thousands of disenfranchised lives and cut real drug abuse, as opposed to the recreational use seen at dances.

I have a friend of sorts, highly intelligent, very creative, a long-term intravenous drug user on a methadone prescription. He could come off, but asks why? Is it better sitting straight or sitting stoned in a miserable bedsit with nothing to do? He's recently made contact with a community dance group, and sees contact with them, just possibly, as part of a reason to change. For the first time he is considering the options for ending his habit.

Commercial clubs don't do that; this is DIY community care. Community dance has the potential fundamentally to change many people's lives for the better. The "caring professions," and drug projects in particular, should acknowledge this. They should start voicing the needs of many of their clients, people who want a reason to live, a sense of belonging, as much as counselling. For many people with real drug problems, DIY care is the only hope they have, the only place where they feel valuable and valued. Let's speak up for it. ■

Tim Malyon is a former drugs counsellor and coordinated the Release "bad trips tent" at free and commercial festivals during the late 1970s

The Exodus Collective is planning a community safer dancing conference. If interested, send a SAE to Community Dancing Initiative, The Exodus Collective, c/o Cottage One, HAZ Manor, Bramingham Lane, Stratley, Luton