



**POLICE
SCOTLAND**
Keeping people safe

Drug Trend Bulletin – Issue 13 September 2016.

The illicit benzodiazepine market in Scotland

Drug trends continually change and normally any new substance would be instantly recognisable as users share their experience and dealers market their product. Police Scotland has identified concerning developments in the illicit benzodiazepine (diazepam) market. This was previously reported in Issue 8 of the Drug Trend Bulletin in April 2016. The current situation is showing no sign of improvement with illicit diazepam being gradually replaced by benzodiazepine type drugs such as etizolam, diclazepam, flubromazepam and the synthetic opioid U-47700. This bulletin reports on the assessment of the current illicit benzodiazepine market by Police Scotland.

Illicit benzodiazepines have historically circulated in the form of a round shaped blue colour pill with logos attempting to replicate legitimate diazepam tablets. The counterfeit tablets are generally perceived to contain a 10mg dose of diazepam with a single tablet selling for 50p-£1. This market has grown to meet demand with reports of users taking 10 or 20 tablets at one time which defies any medically prescribed dosage levels.

The use of different drugs at the same time is known as 'poly' drug use and a dangerous practice placing the user in risk of overdose or death. Whilst controlled drugs can cause death, it is assessed the highest risk for users is 'poly' drug use, particularly involving perceived diazepam pills.

The media often describe benzodiazepine tablets as 'killer pills', this is not technically correct as the current group of benzodiazepine type drugs in circulation, are not generally solely responsible for drug related deaths. Benzodiazepine type drugs are a contributory factor in drug related deaths however the main issue is 'poly' drug use including alcohol.

In the first quarter of 2016, Police Scotland identified changes in the illegal benzodiazepine market as more yellow colour 5mg diazepam tablets began to appear, many of them in blister packaging. It was assessed this was due to market demand as users confidence in the quality of the perceived blue 10mg tablets diminished. It was also identified that Organised Crime Groups were diverting pharmaceutically produced yellow diazepam tablets in blister packaging from legitimate production lines, flooding the market with them. There have been a number of significant police seizures as the benzodiazepine market was actively targeted.

In 2012, Police Scotland and Abertay University, Dundee, started a research project to analyse the content of illicitly sold diazepam. This project provided valuable information regarding the range of dose within tablets perceived to be blue 10mg diazepam. Of 65 case samples examined from separate seizures, some were found to have no diazepam in them whilst most of the tablets contained a range of between 8mg - 48mg. The majority of tablets analysed contained dose levels of 9mg-25mg. The most commonly counterfeited blue 10 mg tablet logo was the letters MA superimposed over each other on one side and the markings D 10 on the reverse, sometimes with a half score mark. It is of note similar logos are now appearing on white tablets containing etizolam.

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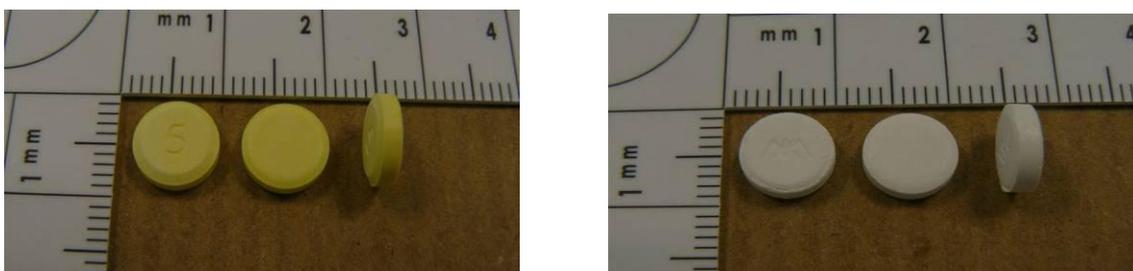
Illicit benzodiazepine tablet logos identified by Abertay University



2016 saw a marked change in the type of perceived benzodiazepines tablets in circulation. More etizolam tablets are now being recovered along with other benzodiazepine type drugs including diclazepam and flubromazepam. The supply of etizolam and diclazepam is now regulated under the new Psychoactive Substances Act which came into force on 26th May 2016. Because some of the benzodiazepine type drugs were unregulated prior to 26th May 2016, drug dealers identified they were a sellable product without the risk as dealing in diazepam which is controlled. In addition there has been a concerning development whereby the drug U-47700 has been identified in yellow tablets stamped with the number 5, this would be perceived as a benzodiazepine type drug.

Benzodiazepine type tablets containing U – 47700

The tablets shown below would be perceived to contain diazepam, laboratory analysis has identified the content as U-47700. U-47700 is related to AH-7921 which is controlled as a Class 'A' drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 in 2015.



The white tablet on the right has the MA logo stamped on it and would be perceived as a benzodiazepine type pill.

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Tablets currently (2016) being sold as benzodiazepines

| Markings | Picture | Contents |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| NTZ - 1.0 |  | Etizolam |
| 5 |  | Etizolam |
| C - DC |  | Paracetamol and Dipyrrone |
| MA |  | U-47700 |
| 5 |  | U-47700 |
| Diazepam D - 10 |  | Etizolam |
| NTZ - 1.0 |  | Etizolam |
| 5 |  | U-47700 and Etizolam |
| COX - DC |  | U-47700 |
| C - DC |  | Paracetamol |
| D - 10 |  | Diclazepam |
| 10 |  | Etizolam |
| NTZ - 1.0 |  | Etizolam |
| NTZ - 1.0 |  | Etizolam |

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Etizolam tablet content

Police Scotland have identified the benzodiazepine market is currently more complex than it has ever been. There are a variety of different drugs in circulation in blue, yellow and white tablets which will be perceived by users as benzodiazepine type drugs. Etizolam is now commonly identified in blue coloured pills with the markings NTZ or EZ and the figures 1.0. Scientific analysis has identified etizolam and other psychoactive substances within tablets bearing similar markings to diazepam.

At the request of Police Scotland, Glasgow University analysed 3 different logo types which would be sold as benzodiazepines. The results are shown below.



Tablet contained 0.81 mg of etizolam



Tablet contained 0.85 mg of etizolam



Tablet contained 0.85 mg of etizolam

Unlike the diazepam analysed by Abertay University, the drug content in these three completely unrelated recoveries was very similar and within the parameters of a 1.0 mg dose that would be anticipated in an etizolam tablet which is only produced legitimately abroad. Etizolam is described as being ten times stronger than diazepam. Whilst this is technically correct on a weight for weight basis the 1.0mg dose is ten times lower than a 10mg dose.

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The damage caused by benzodiazepines to communities is significant. Whilst etizolam and diclazepam are regulated under the provisions of the Psychoactive Substances legislation, in reality they are commonly sold as 'blues'. This term is a reference to a range of tablets which look like and will be perceived as diazepam. Users will generally be unable to distinguish between proper diazepam and other tablets containing benzodiazepine type drugs.

Clinical experience of benzodiazepines

Dr Hazel Torrance of Glasgow University Department of Forensic Medicine and Science, reports that benzodiazepines, as a class of drug, have always been popular in Scotland, particularly diazepam. However, since the emergence of New Psychoactive Substances the variety of benzodiazepines available has increased. Some are prescribed elsewhere in the world while others have been developed to purposely circumvent legislation. Diazepam is, and continues to be, a regular occurrence in clinical and post-mortem experience and in 2010 we started detecting phenazepam, but when this was controlled in 2012, it gradually diminished and was replaced by etizolam.

The prevalence of etizolam saw a slight reduction in 2014, possibly due to the perceived concern it was likely to be controlled under the MDA. However, due to its continued lack of control under the MDA it continues to be detected and most notably since October 2015 the number of deaths with etizolam has increased significantly. The other benzodiazepine of note is diclazepam, which we have observed in several drug-related deaths although not to the same extent as etizolam. Other benzodiazepines found in drug-related deaths but only a handful of cases are flubromazepam, flubromazolam and pyrazolam.

Benzodiazepines, on their own, are a relatively safe group of drugs, the concern is when they are taken with other drugs that act on the body in the same way, like heroin, methadone and alcohol (poly-drug use). If people do not realise what drug they are taking or the dose, the risk of death is further increased. Finding an opioid-type drug (U-47700) in pills which could be perceived to be benzodiazepines to users is a major concern due to the increased risk of death, however to date we have not observed this drug in any deaths.

Dr Richard Stevenson of NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde reports a substantial increase in the number of benzodiazepine-related Emergency Department presentations. He reports, Glasgow Royal Infirmary is currently admitting between 2 to 6 patients per day who have ingested 'street' valium, often in addition to prescribed medications and/or alcohol. Admission times range from 12 to 24 hour depending upon the severity of intoxication. Complications from such presentations include aspiration of stomach contents into the lungs, lack of oxygen to the brain from depressed respiration and death.

Of note following the ingestion of yellow 'street' diazepam tablets, a few patients have suffered seizures, this may be due to the presence of the synthetic opiate U47700 detected in some tablets.

Not all patients who have ingested benzodiazepines will require admission, blood tests are not used to detect the presence of the drug but to exclude other conditions that may mimic intoxication. Urine drug testing is of limited value in patients who regularly take benzodiazepines and cannot distinguish between the different subtypes.

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Police Scotland National Drug Coordinator

Detective Inspector Michael Miller, Police Scotland's National Drug Coordinator warns, "Drug trends continually evolve as criminal networks attempt to maximise their profits. Benzodiazepine abuse is a significant problem throughout Scotland and we have been working locally with our key partners to identify and address any local issues and support those affected by the harms caused by benzodiazepines. Users simply don't know what is in these tablets and you can't take something safely if you don't know its contents."

Produced by:

Mr Kenny Simpson - Statement of Opinion Unit Coordinator

Police Scotland

Specialist Crime Division

Organised Crime and Counter Terrorism Unit

Telephone : Office 0141 800 4517 - Mobile 07775 854750

Email : kenny.simpson@scotland.pnn.police.uk