

Legal woes over `legal highs`

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KUALA LUMPUR: POLICE have a new menace to face in the decades-old war on drugs, one which is growing ever larger every day.

They are facing the growing popularity of so-called “legal” drugs.

Marketed as “legal highs” and “research chemicals”, these synthetic drugs, otherwise known as “new psychoactive substances” (NPS), are proliferating at an unprecedented rate and posing significant health challenges.



Police want NPS drugs added to Poisons Act 1952

Federal police Narcotics Department director Datuk Seri Mokhtar Shariff is a worried man as he sees NPS drugs replacing “traditional” narcotics soon.

Speaking to the *New Straits Times*, he said between 10 and 12 new substances might be listed under the Third Schedule of the Poisons Act 1952, as police have sent a request to the Health Ministry to include these drugs in the schedule to combat the growing trend of NPS usage.

“This new synthetic drug is designed to replicate the effects of illegal substances. I believe NPS will replace ‘traditional’ drugs in five years.

“This is my biggest fear as drug abusers are using NPS, which has yet to be defined in drug laws. As such, these drugs are considered legal.”

Mokhtar said the proposal for listing NPS drugs in the Third Schedule came from the Pharmaceutical Services Division of the Health Ministry in May.

Police had already noticed the growing popularity of such drugs.

“We were in agreement with their proposal. By doing this, police can act against NPS abusers, or else they would get off scot-free. My department is working with the Chemistry Department in identifying new types of NPS in the market.”

Mokhtar said his department was intensifying efforts to educate policemen on how to identify these new drugs.

The problem was that there were no field tests for NPS drugs as many of these new drugs had yet to be identified.

“We may have seized the drugs, but only the Chemistry Department can verify them.

“We have seized 14 types of unknown substances. They will remain unknown until the Chemistry Department results.”

Once NPS drugs are identified, the Narcotics Department will ask for field test kits to identify NPS drugs without having to send samples to the Chemistry Department.

(Though field tests are available for the more “traditional” drugs, as a matter of legal procedure, samples of drugs are also sent to the Chemistry Department for further tests and confirmation of field test results.)

“We need test kits for the officers, like what we have for heroine, cannabis, methamphetamine, ketamine and other drugs, for them to conduct an initial test.” he said.

He said his department was exchanging information with other countries that had problems with NPS abuse.

“We have exchanged information with some countries in Europe and also the United States, to keep abreast of the latest drugs available. Based on the intelligence these countries have gathered, NPS is available in tablet and powder form as well as sachets.”

Asked what the consequences of using NPS, he said the drugs could cause a similar range of problems as the drugs they were manufactured to mimic, including a risk of dependence with repeated use.

“However, some appear to be more dangerous than the traditional drugs they mimic. The use of NPS is often related to paranoia, psychosis, seizure and death.”

A source with the Health Ministry said that it had received a proposal to list new substances under the Poisons Act 1952.

“We are conducting research on each proposed substance,” she told the NST, adding that the results were expected soon.

Under the Poisons Act, it is illegal for anyone to import, export, manufacture, compound, mix, dispense, sell, supply, administer, possess or use any psychotropic substance except under regulation.

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*Federal police Narcotics
Department director*

