

Sales Of Synthetic Drugs Are On A High

M. Morri & I. Walker, *The Sunday Telegraph* (14/4/13)

It was a massive haul – 40,000 packets of synthetic cannabis. But police didn't even know if they could charge the owners. The powder, which is usually diluted with nail polish remover, sprayed on to dried leaf then put in 1g, 3g or 7g sealed bags and sold through Sydney shops as a legal high, was seized in the western suburbs in October.

What followed was an agonising wait as investigators worked through a canon of laws where the line between what is legal and illegal is constantly shifting.

Finally, on Tuesday, two men aged 28 and 30, were charged with two counts of large commercial drug supply and dealing with the proceeds of crime in relation to the seizure of 7kg of raw synthetic powder and more than 100kg of packaged, synthetic cannabis. The drug squad is locked in a chemical war against the rising tide of synthetic drugs – including fake cocaine and LSD – being sold throughout the state as legitimate.

Detective Superintendent Nick Bingham said the problem of synthetic drugs that mimicked the effects of cannabis and cocaine emerged about three years ago. 'When this became a bigger issue nationally about two years ago, the government moved pretty quickly and banned seven substances,' Supt Bingham said. The move had little

effect and, in fact, made the problem worse.

'In an 18-month period from July 8 to December last year, 334 synthetic cannabis products and 344 other synthetics we call novel psychoactive substances, which include 'bath salts', have been banned. A substance can be outlawed on Friday and the next week a chemist, normally in China or New Zealand, 'tweaks' a molecule or two and the composition is different to the banned substance.'

In the past two years police and hospitals have seen increasing numbers of people suffering severe psychotic episodes as a result of synthetic highs. Supt Bingham said some may be 'legal but lethal'.

Just two weeks ago an 18-year-old girl was found roaming naked through the streets of Kirribilli with a 19-year-old male. Both appeared to be in a psychotic rage.

'One of the symptoms of these synthetic drugs is people's bodies overheat and they need to remove their clothes to try to cool down,' Supt Bingham said.

In October last year truck driver Glenn Punch was found running around naked near an industrial site in the Hunter region. He collapsed and later died in hospital. His girlfriend was found partly naked in his truck nearby in a

critical condition, but survived. Both had injected a synthetic drug of uncertain legal status. A report on synthetic drugs from a parliamentary inquiry last year is due for release within months.

‘Right now there’s no way of knowing what’s in the product you are getting. What sort of damage is being done in the long term is still unknown,’ Supt Bingham said.