

National Assembly for Wales
Health and Social Care Committee

Inquiry into new psychoactive substances (“legal highs”)

Evidence from Angelus Foundation – LH 11



National Assembly for Wales Inquiry into new psychoactive substances (“legal highs”) - Angelus Submission

Introduction

1) The Angelus Foundation was founded in 2009 by Maryon Stewart, the health practitioner, author and broadcaster. Her 21 year-old daughter, Hester, a medical student and athlete, passed away after consuming a legal high (GBL) in April 2009. The Foundation has since attracted a group of experts, the Angelus Advisory Board, which brings together expertise from chemical, medical and behavioural sciences, as well as having considerable experience in both the areas of enforcement and misuse of new psychoactive substances (NPS).

2) Angelus is the only drugs charity dedicated to raise awareness about legal highs and club drugs. Much of our work is showed cased in our website for young people www.whynotfindout.org. There is also a website for families www.angelusfoundation.com.

Our Vision

3) All young people in the UK know the dangers of ‘legal highs’ and are able to make wise choices that keep them safe.

Introduction

4) Angelus’s prime contribution to this Inquiry by the National Assembly for Wales is to offer evidence based on our Foundation’s experience of how best to raise awareness of the threat of legal highs to young people. Below is a summary of Angelus’s various programmes for education and prevention. Members are invited to assess the efficacy of these initiatives and their applicability in Wales. In addition, there is also a section (page 4) on a legal change we initiated with HM Opposition in 2013 aimed at ceasing the NPS trade in high street headshops.

5) All organisations who have tried to make constructive interventions on NPS will be aware of the difficulties deriving from a lack of reliable data around prevalence and behavioural change. However, that should not mean there should be no attempt affect change until such data is published. There is a wealth of anecdotal evidence from probation officers, police, prison staff, teachers and health professionals to indicate the immediate and longer-term harm from NPS is serious, growing and a strong response from agencies and NGOs is urgent. There is also a need to devote resources into research for example there is no data on where NPS are obtained i.e. proportion purchased online, from headshops, dealers or friends. This information would help inform how to target health messaging.

Education

Making PSHE Compulsory

6) The previous Westminster Government in 2010 had made clear its intention to make drugs education statutory through compulsory PSHE through national curriculum. The Coalition Government has rejected that policy and placed drugs education mainly in the science curriculum.

7) Angelus is not satisfied that is likely to allow the correcting messaging about the risks of drug harms particularly new legal drugs and has consequently been campaigning for compulsory PSHE. Placing drugs education within the constraints of an academic subject restricts its context to facts when there is considerable numbers of uncertain factors which lead to drug misuse. Moreover the issue at hand about NPS is that there are sparse numbers of facts which can be relied upon. There have not been any kind of comprehensive harms studies compiled. The purpose of drugs education should be to help build resilience of the individual into making better choices about their own well-being.

8) The Coalition has also given schools autonomy to determine the level of drugs education. Figures from Mentor UK show the majority (60%) are achieving one hour or less per year. Only 15% of schools reach the minimum standard recommended by Angelus of one hour, per term per school. There is also, in our view, insufficient direction from central Government on what should be taught and by what means. It is not clear whether the Labour Party maintains its previous level of enthusiasm for compulsory PSHE beyond its publicly stated commitments to Sex and Relationship Education.

Festivals

9) Festival audiences are particularly vulnerable to experimentation with NPS. The ambience can lend itself to novel experience for young groups and also older age groups who never or rarely tried drugs in their youth but are tempted to recapture their youth. The Association of Independent Festivals invited Angelus to partner them in raising awareness of the dangers of NPS in December 2013. It followed a succession of serious incidents the previous summer (including a death from 5-EAPB at Brownstock festival). We partnered AIF on a large-scale blackout of 25+ festival websites, including Glastonbury over May Bank Holiday which reached potentially a million young people through social and traditional media. Angelus has developed

comedy films setting out dangers of NPS and one specifically aimed at the effects of synthetic cannabis. We have also advised on safety information on websites, through e-flyers and leaflets, liaison with local media and promotion of an on-line challenge with Yourvine.com (see Prevention section).

Universities

10) There are over 1.8m undergraduates in the UK and often this is the first exposure they have to strong psychoactive substances whether legal or illegal. The rapid rise of Mephedrone (2008-10) was substantially fuelled by university students because of the drug's high purity and low cost. NPS/legal highs are still of considerable higher purity than competitor drugs such as ecstasy or cocaine. Angelus has been engaging with students at King's College London, Sussex University and Southampton University who showed a high interest in the subject but little knowledge of the risks. Our Fresher's survey from September 2014 showed 61% of their friends had tried NPS, 36% had been offered them and 19% had tried them.

Prevention

Harm Reduction through film

11) Angelus has delivered to over 1,500 school students (14 – 18 year olds) a lesson or assembly showing an Angelus film 'Not What it Says on the Tin' and measuring perception before and after, through surveys. Over three quarters of **young people** say they are shocked by the content and 95 per cent say it changes their minds about trying legal highs.

12) It is also clear from feedback from our school workshops that young people are angry with the sellers/suppliers who seek portray the substances as low risk but equally frustrated with the figures in authority who have not allowed them to be educated on this vital matter. We are awaiting the imminent publication of our schools programme data in an academic journal. We have made several other films for separate projects which can be viewed from our websites - some are drug specific, for example a ketamine film commissioned by ACMD chair Prof Les Iversen as well as films exposing harms of synthetic cannabis.

<http://www.angelusfoundation.com/video/synthetic-cannabis-90sec-film/>

Yourvine

13) 'The Real Deal', is an innovative online challenge designed to raise awareness among young people about the harms and consequences of legal highs. The player is put in the position of a supplier of NPS and quickly learns the haphazard nature of the industry where unpredictable and untested substances are marketed recklessly without any regard for the welfare of the consumer. Analytics produced by Yourvine show: 81% understood NPS were dangerous, 89% felt they had learnt something and 71% would definitely recommend it to a friend. Members can take the challenge on the following link after signing up to Yourvine. <https://campaigns.yourvine.com>

Parents

14) The Frank survey of 2012 showed 86% of parents had no knowledge of NPS/Legal highs or had simply not heard of them. Given the displacement from

illegal to legal drugs by a significant proportion of the youth population this a deeply concerning level of ignorance when many a majority (56%) of 11-15 year olds rely on their parents for information on drugs. Angelus has produced a highly successful parents booklet with Adfam and the Club Drug Clinic. Angelus has also recently produced some parents films featuring Eamonn Holmes, Cheri Lunghi and Dr Hillary Jones which will soon be launched. We are also soon to launch an online parents community.

Practitioners' Views

15) Angelus co-hosted a conference aimed at practitioners on 26 June with VSA charity Re-Solve. The resulting report 'Legal Highs: An Action Plan for Change' was sent to all party leaders. Among its recommendations:

More research to fill knowledge gaps:

- The development of better data collection methods
- The creation of a robust, empirical, peer-reviewed research base
- Greater engagement with users to fill any knowledge gaps.

Resources targeted on education, with a focus on harm reduction:

- The creation of a central depository of resources and information on NPS
- Promotion of the message that 'legal' doesn't mean 'safe'
- Co-ordination from the central but delivery at a local level.

Clearly defined roles and responsibilities:

- National government to develop a clear legislative framework, act as a central point of co-ordination, and develop messages
- Local government to deliver treatment, support and enforcement
- Charities to continue their important work in spreading information

Legal Changes

16) In 2013, Angelus worked closely with HM Opposition in the formulation and accompanying submissions of an amendment to the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill (now 2014 Act). The purpose of the amendment was to stop the sale/supply of "synthetic, intoxicating psychoactive substances" with exemptions for alcohol, tobacco, medicines and certain foodstuffs. Its objective was to restrict the sale of products headshops would be permitted to sell, in the same way it is an offence to sell butane and glues to minors under the Intoxicating Substances Act 1985.

17) The legislation would work by a Court issuing a (civilian) Order against a particular shop listing the products identified by Trading Standards Officers, which appeared to be psychoactive, synthetic and intoxicating. Any breach of an Order issued to a supplier/retailer would be a criminal offence. If the court issuing the Order were satisfied, on the balance of probabilities, that the headshop in question were selling "psychoactive" and "intoxicating" substances then the onus would be on the owner to demonstrate he was not.

18) The Government is to shortly publish its own findings on how to tackle the easy access to these products through the Home Office review.

19) Angelus also supports a comprehensive review of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

Angelus
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