



news release

from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

No. 2/2001 – 15 March 2001

EU ACTS ON RISING CONCERN OVER SYNTHETIC DRUGS GHB AND KETAMINE

The **EU** today responded to rising concern over the misuse of GHB and ketamine. Since the mid-1990s, these two synthetic substances – widely used in human and veterinary medicine for 30 years – have been surfacing as recreational drugs.

Some EU countries have reported worries over GHB's surreptitious use in sexual assaults. Although the extent of this is unknown, the EMCDDA and its risk-assessment partners are recommending that Member States consider the role of GHB and other drugs in this area. Concern over ketamine centres on its unpredictability in producing 'near-death' experiences.

Today the **EU** Justice and Home Affairs Council, meeting in Brussels, adopted formal conclusions that Member States should monitor both drugs closely. These follow conclusions by the Council's Horizontal Working Party on Drugs, and previous proposals from the European Commission, on two risk-assessment reports drawn up last year by the **EU** drugs agency, the **EMCDDA**.

Today's Council conclusions call for 'active' monitoring of GHB this year and continued monitoring of ketamine. The **EMCDDA** and Europol are asked to report on this monitoring by the end of the year. On the basis of this, the Council will consider if control at **EU** level is appropriate.

Drugs agency chief Georges Estievenart says: 'There is a need to target objective information on both substances to vulnerable at-risk groups.'

At the Council's request, the drugs agency and Europol will monitor:

- Consumption, trafficking, and public health related problems linked to GHB – in particular, its clinical effects; prevalence and patterns of use; seizures; the role of organised crime in production, diversion and trafficking; and that of the Internet in marketing it for non-medical use.
- Manufacture, trafficking, patterns of use and health consequences of ketamine, particularly trends in recreational use.

Member States are invited to share information on preventive and risk-reduction measures related to the non-medical use of GHB, including appropriate messages to users. They are also invited to submit proposals for research into the effects of ketamine use. These will be considered under the **EU's** Fifth Framework Programme for Research and Development.

The Council calls on the European Commission to report on the state of negotiations with the chemical industry on the key issue of limiting diversion of GHB and its precursors. It also urges that possible improvements in the control of ketamine diversion be discussed with the pharmaceutical industry. An important factor here is ensuring the drug's continued availability for medical and veterinary use.

The **EMCDDA** reports particular concerns over the diversion of ketamine from legitimate supply to the black market – being difficult to manufacture, the drug is often stolen from veterinary clinics. There are also worries over involvement of organised crime and the health risk of tablets passed off as 'ecstasy'.

The agency notes the development of a 'kitchen-sink' GHB 'industry', since the drug can be made easily without special equipment.

'Dark' and 'near-death' experiences

Legitimate uses of GHB, an anaesthetic, include treatment of alcohol withdrawal. Misuse of the drug brings out its darker side, posing significant health risks, due to the narrow margin between a recreational dose and one leading to unconsciousness or, in rare cases, irreversible coma. A very fine line divides the relaxation and euphoria the drug can induce and its potentially dangerous consequences.

The drug is taken orally and also offered as liquid or a powder. Once dissolved, it is difficult to detect, being colourless, odourless and relatively tasteless. This makes it unobtrusive in groups of people drinking alcohol. GHB's various street names include 'liquid ecstasy' 'easy lay' 'scoop' and 'fantasy'.

Ketamine is traditionally used as a veterinary anaesthetic and also, to a lesser extent, in human medicine – for example, in treating burn victims. Recreationally, it's injected as a liquid or inhaled as powder. Its street names include K, KitKat, cat valium, vitamin K and super K.

Misuse can lead to psychological dependence, loss of self-control and acute intoxication. It is said to produce 'out-of-body' or (in larger doses) 'near-death' experiences. With an upmarket image, its use appears higher among older, highly-educated, experienced MDMA users – particularly in the new-age traveller or gay club scenes. Ketamine is sometimes sold under the guise of ecstasy. As its effect depends very much on the dose, uncertainty about its concentration in ecstasy tablets poses particular risks. Seizures suggest low levels of availability for illicit use in the EU.

Notes to editors

1. GHB = gamma-hydroxybutyric acid; ketamine = 2-(2-chlorophenyl)-2-(methylamino)-cyclohexanone.
2. On 17 April 2000, the Portuguese Presidency of the European Council formally notified GHB and ketamine to the EMCDDA for risk assessment under Article 4 of the Joint Action on new synthetic drugs of 16 July 1997.
See http://www.emcdda.org/activities/newsynth_jointaction.shtml
3. A meeting of the EMCDDA's Scientific Committee – extended by experts nominated by EU Member States and representatives of the European Commission, Europol and the European Agency for the Evaluation of Medicinal Products – was held from 25–26 September 2000 to assess the health and social risks of the substances and possible consequences of prohibition. Their final risk-assessment reports were submitted on 13 October to the French Presidency of the Horizontal Working Party on Drugs (HWPD) and the European Commission.
4. On 21 November – in accordance with Article 5 of the Joint Action – the European Commission submitted a proposal to the Council's HWPD. On 16 February the HWPD forwarded its draft conclusions to the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) for examination on 7 March prior to referral to the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 15 March for adoption as an 'A point'.
5. In 1999, the EU defined another synthetic drug 4-MTA (known on the street as 'flat-liners') to be placed under control measures and criminal penalties in Member States following a risk assessment by the EMCDDA. For the news release on 4-MTA (15/9/1999) see <http://www.emcdda.org/press/oldnews.shtml>
6. A **feature article** on GHB and ketamine can be downloaded from the EMCDDA's website at: <http://www.emcdda.org/press/press.shtml>

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