

Preparing for the ice age

'Off the shelf and highly addictive'

'People are saying crystal meth is not taking hold in the UK,' says Jonathan, a recovered addict.

'What they don't understand is how addictive the drug is. A hit of crystal meth can have the same effect as a hit of crack; but the production method of crystal meth is so much cheaper and more readily available. It's off the shelf, almost like alcohol.

'I can go to my local hardware shop and buy everything I need to make crystal meth, the same as I can go to an off licence and buy everything I need to be an alcoholic. It really is as easy as that.

'People are buying crystal meth thinking that it's crack. My experience of good crack is that the rocks are clear, so if someone hands you a £20 stone of crystal meth that's completely clear you're going to think 'wow, what fantastic gear'. When you burn it, you get oil that's exactly the right constitution.

'Drugs workers should be educating, speaking to active addicts and saying 'do you realise you could have been smoking crystal meth?' Most will probably say no.

'Some people have said there's little hope of recovery from crystal meth addiction, but you can use the same 12-step programme as for other drugs. You can become a recovering addict one day at a time.

'It doesn't matter if you smoke crystal meth, drink three bottles of vodka, or jack up three bags of brown – you're an addict. Crystal meth's biggest threat is that it's readily available and cheap.'

'No evidence we're on the verge of an epidemic'

'It's very hard to say categorically that there's an increase in the drug. A lot of the stories associated with its use seem to be anecdotal,' says David Mackintosh, London Drug Policy Forum.

'There does seem to be some increase in its use – a lot of it on the club scene. But there isn't hard statistical evidence to say we're on the verge of a meth epidemic. There have been factories identified within the UK, and some police forces have dismantled labs. But it's not on a huge scale. They have raided a number of addresses and found kit. Hampshire are very switched onto methamphetamine and have done a lot of work. Some other forces haven't really encountered it yet.

'A lot of dealers would have a strong interest in preventing ice from taking over from crack

because as a dealer there's no way you could make as much money with it. You'd probably lose about 75 per cent of your profits.

'We need to be very clear what form of methamphetamine we're talking about. Are we talking about pills, known as yabba, or powder which has turned up in some cocaine samples as a bulking agent or whatever, or are we talking about ice (rocks).

'The argument that swung the ACMD on reclassification was that it's a precautionary measure. Resources and activity only really flow towards class A drug problems.

'There's no reason to suppose the UK is immune, but it's quite odd the way the argument's been polarised by some people. I haven't heard many police officers say that there's going to be a big problem. Very small numbers of users are actually turning up for treatment – but we're not awfully good at attracting stimulant users in general.

'Also, it might take five years before anyone decides it's a problem worth doing something about and that there's a need to access services. We have to accept that drug treatment figures lag considerably behind usage, and you wouldn't use them as an indication of current usage.

'There has been some advice that's gone out from ACPO. Obviously one of the big issues from a police perspective is that a meth lab is a hazardous chemical environment. You don't want to send people into an environment where there could be a hazard of exploding chemicals. It's not just a drugs issue, it's a health and safety – and a public safety – issue. In the States where there are a lot of small-scale DIY meth labs, every now and again a lab goes bang. An explosion in a residential tower block in London would cause a great deal of excitement.

'It's an awkward situation for the police to deal with, and ACPO have done their best to be sensible and pragmatic. They haven't gone out and done a mass scare campaign. They've held events in London for service providers to ask questions and repeat what they're picking up from the street and their clients. If the Home Office had waited for evidence of a problem before they'd reclassified the drug, they would have been in trouble.

Methamphetamine, commonly known as crystal meth, was reclassified from class B to a class A drug on 18 January, meaning the 'severest penalties' for users and dealers. Home Office minister Vernon Coaker said that while the drug is not widespread in the UK, 'we cannot afford to be complacent'. **DDN** hears two different perspectives.

For a detailed look behind the hype of crystal meth, see 'The ice age is coming' (DDN, 17 July 2006, p10), by 'Delia Venus Wynn' who has first-hand experience of producers, suppliers and users. Available on our website archive of DDN back issues at www.drinkanddrugs.net.

