



Synnies Deaths Tip of Iceberg Says Former Importer

By Nathan Frost

A former importer of synthetic drugs who wishes to remain anonymous has warned that the recent spate of deaths linked to AMB-Fubina is just the tip of the iceberg.

Potent synthetic drugs are being sourced in bulk online by kiwi drug dealers to sell offline and the profits are enormous,' he said.

'For those buying wholesale amounts, the price of one gram of AMB fubina can be as low as 1 USD and be used to make four ounces of synthetic product with a street value of up to \$2000,' he said.

Internet technologies developed over the last decade are facilitating the ease with which synthetic drugs can be purchased leading to a rapid global expansion in online marketing for new psychoactive substances driven by free-market trade and greed.

'It's never been cheaper or easier to import into New Zealand,' he said.

'Research chemical companies based in either China or the EU are providing product worldwide for the synthetic black market utilising either the internet or crypto-market transactions through the dark-web.'

'These companies employ effective concealment methods of either powders or liquids and guarantee importers refund of money in the event of border seizures,' he said

'A lot of Chinese companies will send with a guarantee that you'll receive their product and will put your money in escrow so they don't receive your money until you've signed for it. They offer a 100% guarantee on delivery and a high purity level that is regulated via an online peer based rating system.'

'Like everything (drugs) sent from overseas it's sent in Mylar- a material used to bounce back light to reflect x-rays. If its packaged right and in a box with something else in the side of the box you won't see it because the Mylar will deflect the x-ray,' he said.

'Now that people vape everyone is importing vape juice and people get the research chemical powders broken down into liquid form, either in solvents or water and then baked back off once it arrives at its destination. There's no smell because the bottles are sealed with rubber seals and cleaned with solvent before being covered in plastic packaging over the top.'

'Basically, any substance that can be concealed as a powder or liquefied, can be easily smuggled into New Zealand,' he said.

'There's other tricks to importation as well, the weight of a package can alter the amount of border scrutiny it receives, and certain overseas mail services and cut out countries are employed to minimise risk too.'

It's not just the compounds linked to synthetic products that New Zealanders should be worried about either.

'High potency synthetic analogues mimicking the effects of opiate, psychedelic and stimulant drugs have all been developed and in many cases the psychoactive impact of these drugs on human brain receptors is unknown because they've never been subject to any form of testing,' he said.

'Any person engaging in recreational drug use is potentially at risk.'

'Just one gram of ABM Fubinaca is sufficient to produce four ounces of average strength synthetic cannabis but if you decide to take that one gram and make one ounce then you've got some really explosive strength synnie that's going rock peoples' world.'

'The people who are bringing in kilos aren't going to make four thousand ounces they're going to be making one thousand ounces, it's going to be super strong and it's going to send users into a catatonic state,' he said.

The extreme potency of synthetic compounds coupled with New Zealand's home cooked number eight wire drug culture has been a contributing factor in the spate of deaths.

'I think the deaths have been caused by back yard chemists mixing ABM Fubinaca or MMB Chminaca at a high dose before putting it in a spray bottle and randomly spraying it on the plant material unevenly. Because of the strength of the compounds uneven distribution can mean the difference between a dose that gets you high and a dose that kills you,' he said.

'A person who is onto it will use a pressure cooker to evenly distribute the compounds while allowing the flammable vapours to escape away from the heat source. Anything that can be evaporated can be used but predominantly people will use acetone or isopropyl alcohol because they're easy to get, have high rates of evaporation and don't leave behind much residue on the plant material.'

'All this talk in the media about toxic materials like fly spray, weed killer or petrol being used is a bit farfetched, the toxicity is linked to the strength of the dose not some random toxic substance,' he said.

Another issue with synthetic products is that often more than one compound is used.

'The more synthetic compounds people dissolve into solution to distribute onto plant material, the more it's going to mess you up. Each synthetic cannabinoid had a different hit to it from mild relaxation to extreme hallucinations to a couch sloth feeling. It's like mixing heroin with crack cocaine and methamphetamine all in one and smoking that. You're going to go up, you're going to go down, you're going to go sideways. You're going to get completely twisted.'

'Those receptors you're hitting are going to get overloaded and send your brain into a catatonic state and you're going to be useless sitting there with your mouth open. I've seen it happen, people having a bucket bong and afterwards they've got a bag in one hand and a lighter in the other and all of a sudden, their mouths will open like the open-mouthed clown at the side shows you pop the ping pong balls in and they'll drop everything and just sit there and be absolutely useless and often have seizures too. They can have some idea of what is going on around them but they can't do anything about it. There's no sitting there and getting paranoid, it's more of an out of body experience, you're in your head but you can't feel any physical sensations you're just trying to hold your body up- it's a strange feeling,' he said.

With the issues relating to the psychoactive industry's inability to prove synthetic compounds are safe without animal testing, elements of the industry have reverted to online operations

outside of NZ and products once available on NZ shelves can still be purchased online with buyers using international cut out addresses via you-shop type services.

Some of these companies are re-labelling their products as zero percent nicotine vape juice.

That dealers can provide an extremely strong and cheap product while making enormous profits means synthetics are being aggressively marketed by unscrupulous criminals.

The ease with which synthetic drugs can be imported into the country means a prohibitionist approach to control is unlikely to have any lasting impact.

The New Zealand Government is currently reviewing the Methamphetamine Action Plan in an attempt to develop a comprehensive approach to reduce harms from methamphetamine use. Given that synthetic drugs have been linked to 20 deaths it would be prudent to include all psychoactive substances in this plan. When one substance is given prominence and considered in isolation, it just makes room for other substances - some of which are potentially even more harmful, to fly under the radar. A robust and comprehensive approach that has recovery for individuals and families affected by substances at its core is necessary.

So far, those most affected by the spate of deaths have been young people, those living rough, those suffering from mental illness and other marginalised groups. We need to act before we see more deaths and suffering.