



Review

Abuse of Prescription Drugs in the Context of Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS): A Systematic Review

Fabrizio Schifano, Stefania Chiappini * 🥯, John M. Corkery and Amira Guirguis

Psychopharmacology, Drug Misuse and Novel Psychoactive Substances Research Unit, School of Life and Medical Sciences, University of Hertfordshire, Hertfordshire AL10 9AB, UK; f.schifano@herts.ac.uk (FS.); j.corkery@herts.ac.uk (J.M.C.); a.guirguis2@herts.ac.uk (A.G.)

Correspondence: stefaniachiappini9@gmail.com; Tel.: +44-(0)1707-281053

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Abstract: Recently, a range of prescription and over-the-counter drugs have been reportedly used as Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS), due to their potential for abuse resulting from their high dosage/idiosyncratic methods of self-administration. This paper provides a systematic review of the topic, focusing on a range of medications which have emerged as being used recreationally, either on their own or in combination with NPS. Among gabapentinoids, pregabalin may present with higher addictive liability levels than gabapentin, with pregabalin being mostly identified in the context of opioid, polydrug intake. For antidepressants, their dopaminergic, stimulant-like, bupropion activities may explain their recreational value and diversion from the therapeutic intended use. In some vulnerable clients, a high dosage of venlafaxine ('baby ecstasy') is ingested for recreational purposes, whilst the occurrence of a clinically-relevant withdrawal syndrome may be a significant issue for all venlafaxine-treated patients. Considering second generation antipsychotics, olanzapine appears to be ingested at very large dosages as an 'ideal trip terminator', whilst the immediate-release quetiapine formulation may possess proper abuse liability levels. Within the image- and performanceenhancing drugs (IPEDs) group, the beta-2 agonist clenbuterol ('size zero pill') is reported to be self-administered for aggressive slimming purposes. Finally, high/very high dosage ingestion of the antidiarrhoeal loperamide has shown recent increasing levels of popularity due to its central recreational, anti-withdrawal, opiatergic effects. The emerging abuse of prescription drugs within the context of a rapidly modifying drug scenario represents a challenge for psychiatry, public health and drug-control policies.

Keywords: drug abuse; novel psychoactive substances; NPS; pharmacovigilance; prescribing drugs' abuse

1. Introduction

Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS; 'legal highs' or 'research chemicals') are molecules designed to mimic the effects of legal traditional recreational drugs with intense psychoactive effects and virtual non-detectability in routine drug screenings. NPS include synthetic cannabinoids, cathinone derivatives, psychedelic phenethylamines, novel stimulants, synthetic opioids, tryptamine derivatives, phencyclidine-like dissociatives, piperazines, psychoactive plants/herbs and a range of prescribed medications [1]. The term NPS was first used by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to refer to "substances of abuse, either in a pure form or a preparation, that are not controlled by the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs or the 1961 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, but which may pose a public health threat" [2]. At present, the emergence of NPS, typically from outside Western countries [3], represents a considerable public health challenge.

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