

New Psychoactive Substances consumption and their monitoring during Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Currently, the world is facing an unprecedented change of everyday life, due to the Covid-19 pandemic that has been affecting all the nations for more than one year. The public health systems were restructured in all the countries as a response to the constant emergency status, neglecting some services like toxicological analyses. In this scenario, the current spread of the New Psychoactive Substances is less controlled than before and the data on its expected mutation come from seizures analyses. Where the global distribution of drugs of abuse was affected by the restriction, fentanyl seizures did not drop during the pandemic. Moreover, new synthesis of fentanyl analogues resulted in new toxic adulterants as by products. Furthermore, diversion of benzodiazepines and new designer benzodiazepines were reported during the pandemic period. In this scenario, the scientific community and the international agencies should tighten their collaboration in order to monitor the emerging of new unknown substances. *Clin Ter 2021; 172 (4):271-272. doi: 10.7417/CT.2021.2330*

Key words: new psychoactive substances, Covid-19, international legal response

Dear editor,

It is yet well known how the current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is affecting every aspect of the global population life, posing unprecedented challenges. After more than one year of periodic restrictions and confinement, a common sense of fear and uncertainty has spread especially among fragile people (1).

While some public health issues have been well described, such as the sleep disorders and exacerbation of psychiatric condition, it is difficult to assess the changes in drug consumption so far. In fact, the Covid-19 emergency required a quick reorganization of the public health systems in different countries, affecting the provision of other medical services. Among those, the medico-legal ascertaining of

death registered important delay in Portugal, Bulgaria and Ireland. Moreover, toxicological examinations on alleged drug related cases have been even cancelled, affecting the international monitoring of drug of abuse spread (2). However, this decrease did not come out with the concurrent decrease of overdoses, which conversely seemed to have not changed (3, 4).

Since the beginning of the pandemic, a different drug consumption trend was expected due to shortage of substances, changes in usual drug consumption settings and increased police controls (5). Indeed, the New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) market was encouraged by the natural drug production stop during the confinement periods. Also, NPS are often marketed via darknet, on specialized websites and fora, making the NPS distribution more affordable although the anti-Covid-19 restrictions (6, 7).

Anyway, the lack of literature about NPS fatalities is not significant of a decrease of popularity of these substances. In fact, studies conducted on seized materials during the pandemic showed interesting results. Fentanyl was confirmed as a protagonist in the United States of America (USA) illegal market by the examination of seized materials. (8). It is noteworthy that the seizures of fentanyl increased compared to the year before. While classic drug of abuse such as cannabis showed a remarkable drop during August 2020, fentanyl seizures appeared more constant (8, 9). The shortage of synthesis precursors pushed the NPS producers to experiment new synthesis with different active by product as adulterants detected in the drugs of abuse (10).

A new rising public health concern is represented by the new benzodiazepines. This class of substances represented the 59-71% of NPS reported in the USA during the pandemic era. Whereas some of them are prescription drugs diverted to recreational use, new designer molecules appeared onto the illegal market of drugs. Etizolam was the most reported abused benzodiazepine, followed by flualprazolam, both reported alone or in combination with fentanyl (10).

Certainly, the Covid-19 pandemic has risen social and political issues that were underlying also before, drawing the attention of international institution on the fragility of

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the international public health care. More than before, it appears clear how all the world is connected. In this concern, the lack of harmonized international legal response plays an important role in the spread of NPS, encouraging their marketing and distribution (11). A common and harmonized effort by the scientific community and the international agencies and offices should be made in order to confine the NPS phenomenon. Furthermore, a continuous monitoring of the NPS market and NPS consumption trends is necessary to prevent the uncontrolled spread of new harmful substances which may represent a public health threat.

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