

Management of drugs of misuse: do not forget solvents

Sir,

We read with interest the recent article on the intensive care management of common and uncommon drugs of misuse (vol 72(4), 2011, p. 211). While the authors have eloquently described the assessment and treatment of intoxication from various drugs, we would like to raise awareness of inhalant abuse which includes misuse of volatile solvents, nitrites (such as amyl nitrite) and anaesthetic agents.

Volatile solvent abuse is common, especially among younger age groups; it is the most prevalent form of drug abuse in 11–15-year-olds (Harris, 2006). Substances such as butane, propane and aerosols are used, providing cheap and ubiquitous alternatives to illegal drugs,

which can be purchased in many shops or commonly found around the home.

While volatile solvent abuse-related deaths have slowly declined over the last 20 years, they have outnumbered deaths related to use of MDMA (ecstasy) in the UK every year barring only 2008 (Office for National Statistics, 2009; Ghodse et al, 2010).

The rewards individuals claim to experience from acute volatile solvent intoxication are similar to those of alcohol (mainly euphoria), although the duration of symptoms is usually much more short lived. Untoward effects include seizures, chest pain, cyanosis, muscle weakness, coma and sudden death. As with many drugs of abuse, the sequelae of intoxication are varied and may lead to hospital admission and necessitate critical care assessment. With this in mind these patients deserve a similar initial assessment and level of care as any intoxicated

patient. Management of volatile solvent abuse, as with most of the drugs mentioned in the original article, is usually supportive of symptoms and any consequent organ dysfunction.

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