

New wave: Exploring emerging drugs from clinical and consumer perspectives

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Abstract:

Drug use, a behaviour documented throughout human history, presents a complex mix of risks and benefits. This presentation will share my lived experience growing up in New Zealand when novel psychoactive substances (NPS) were legally available and my perspective as a peer worker providing education and support for people who use drugs for over a decade.

In recent years, the evidence base and acceptance of lived experience workforces have gained momentum. However, the scope of practice for peer workers often hits a glass ceiling, with a focus on drug-related trauma. The increasing prevalence of NPS raises concerns about potential new harms, supporting urgent calls to implement and expand drug checking services and public-facing early warning systems.

But is there space for positive framings of drug use, and what benefits might such acknowledgments enable? Acknowledging positive drug experiences can deconstruct stigma and increase rapport, inviting people who use drugs to share more and trust that they will be believed. Consumer perspectives on emerging drugs are diverse and often considered anecdotal. With unregulated drug markets evolving rapidly, NPS present both opportunities and challenges for public health.

Health professionals, often encountering the most severe consequences of drug use, may develop a risk-averse approach. This viewpoint can overshadow the reality that many individuals engage in drug use positively. Stigmatisation and fear-mongering exacerbate harm, create barriers to seeking help, and increase risks. Consumer perspectives highlight the importance of autonomy and the desire for safe, informed exploration.

Drug checking services and early warning systems empower users by reducing uncertainty and fostering a sense of security, bridging the gap between clinical caution and consumer curiosity. These interventions embody a harm reduction philosophy, respecting individuals' choices and mitigating risks to enhance public health outcomes.