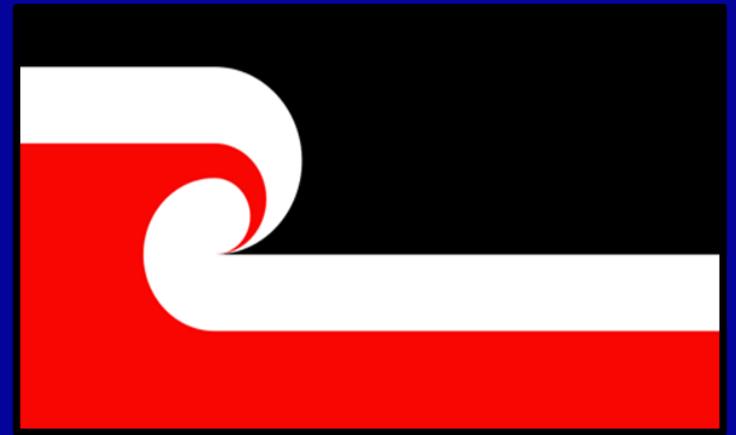
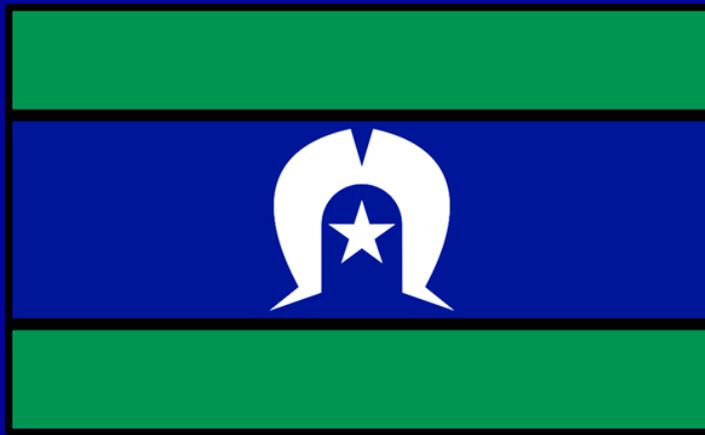


# Exploring Recreational Nitrous Oxide Use Consumption Patterns, Attitudes and Perceptions in Aotearoa New Zealand

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**Ko tēnei te mihi ki ngā tāngata o Te Whenua Moemoeā. Tēnā koutou.**  
**Here is the acknowledgement to the peoples of Australia. Thank you.**

**Nei āku mihi nunui ki ngā mana whenua o kōnei, tāngata Gadigal. Tēnā koutou.**  
**I greatly acknowledge the custodians of this land, the Gadigal people. Thank you.**

**Kā mihi ki Te Āti Awa, Ngāti Toa, Ngāti Kahungunu me Rangitāne, ki ngā kaitiaki o te whenua i tū ai tēnei rangahau. Tēnā koutou.**

**Many acknowledgements to the people of Te Āti Awa, Ngāti Toa, Ngāti Kahungunu and Rangitāne, the guardians of the land on which this research was conducted. Thank you.**

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# Why This Research

## Matters

### Context

- Rising media and policy attention
- Little qualitative research globally, no Aotearoa lived-experience research
- 2024 Medsafe advisory tightened sale/intent

**Aim: To explore how nitrous oxide is consumed, perceived and managed in Aotearoa – through the perspectives of both those with and without consumption experience**

# Method

**Location:** Wairarapa and Wellington, New Zealand

## **Participants and Data Analysis:**

- 19 mostly young participants (age 18-65)
- 9 N<sub>2</sub>O experience + 10 No N<sub>2</sub>O experience
- Focus groups + interviews
- Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019)

# Theme 1: The Social Experience of N<sub>2</sub>O

- First use driven by social exposure, not active seeking  
“Someone else doing it first, so I was like yeah I’ll try it out” - Semaj
- Mostly shared in group settings; bonding + “everyone looks silly together”  
“When you do it with your mates, you look stupid, they look stupid too – we’re all in it together” - Darell
- Knowledge + access comes through friends’, rather than formally  
“I’ve never bought them. It’s always just friends’ who have them” - Darell

# Theme 2: Cherry on Top: Other Substance Use and N<sub>2</sub>O

- First tried while already consuming other substances (alcohol, cannabis, MDMA)  
“Alcohol gave me the confidence to try it” - Selener
- Used to boost, sharpen, or extend another experience  
“Having a little ice cube on top is just making it a bit nicer, then the ice melts and it’s just a glass of water” – Jane Doe
- Cannabis + psychedelics as favoured pairings; alcohol least liked  
“I would probably say weed. It makes the effects stronger and linger a bit longer” – Marshall Mathers

# Theme 3: The Sensory Experience of N<sub>2</sub>O Facilitates Change in Preparation and Consumption Patterns

- Short, intense effects → sit down, take turns, familiar setting
- Physical “tingle” + auditory “wubwub” effects guide behaviour
- Low frequency + low dose: 1 bulb at a time, months between use
- Balloons + dispensers preferred; tanks + direct inhalation seen as riskier
- Main harms: nausea + dizziness (usually polydrug/alcohol)
- Mixed beliefs about oxygen/B12, no neuro harm reported  
“I’ve heard it kills brain cells... but only if you do heaps” – Marshall Mathers

# Theme 4: Negative Media Portrayal and How This Shapes N<sub>2</sub>O Perceptions and Stigma

- Social/mainstream media amplifies extremes (paralysis, “brain cells”) → fear + misconceptions  
“I’ve seen Instagram reels where someone got paralysed – put me off” - Borris
- Stigma shaped by age, legality + inhalant associations → secrecy and selective disclosure
- Environmental concern: visible litter, uncertainty about safe disposal/recycling
- Narratives can racialise use, reinforcing negative stereotypes
- Need for balanced, evidence-based messaging + clear disposal guidance

# Final Thoughts

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- **N<sub>2</sub>O is a social, episodic, low-dose drug for most consumers**
- **Lived experience does not match media or policy narratives**
- **Harms were shaped more by context than chemistry**
- **Evidence-based regulation + harm reduction > prohibition**
- **Young people already self-regulate – support them, don't criminalise them**
- **Co-design harm reduction messaging with young people**