SYNTHETIC DRUGS: A New Epidemic Challenging Law Enforcement, Family Values, and the Lives of our Youth

(By Chad Libby and Brian Walker of Dauphin County Juvenile Probation Department)

“Legal weed”, and other synthetically produced drugs are sweeping the suburbs of America and for a good reason, it’s cheap and easily purchased, virtually undetectable with current toxicity screens, has a potency from 100-800 times of your traditional marijuana, cocaine, and other stimulants, and unfortunately, it’s LEGAL in most states, including PA.

The most popular and commonly used synthetic drug is that of the synthetic cannabinoids, or fake marijuana. This synthetic marijuana is sold over the internet, in gas stations, smoke shops, and other “head shops” marketed as a herb or incense. The packaging even says “not for human consumption” and this is why it is legal to sell so easily as a non-controlled substance. The real reason teens and young adults are purchasing these incenses and herbs is because they are laced with numerous harsh chemicals that when ingested or inhaled, metabolize in the body and resembles the reaction of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), better known as the psychoactive compound in marijuana. Of course, marijuana is not the only synthetic drug that is being created and abused, you can also find synthetic cocaine (sold as bath salts called Snow Leopard, Charge, Wave, etc.) and other stimulants (such as European-based mephedrone sold as plant food called Miaow Miaow, Drone, or MCAT) with similar ruses that allow it to be sold legally. Law enforcement officials and the federal government are working hard at banning the sale of these drugs until a decision can be made whether or not the chemicals added to these incenses should be categorized as a scheduled-1 drug.

The synthetic marijuana being purchased has many different brand names and labels, but all are created with the same characteristics and similar chemicals. Such brand names include: K-2, Spice, Krypto, Legal Bud, Genie, Wicked, Blue Dragon, Black Mamba, Blaze, Red-X Dawn, Bliss, Zohai, Mr. Smiley, and so on. They are generally packaged in square plastic or foil wrappers the size of a Lipton tea-bag wrapper. The material inside is usually brown or green and has the consistency of tea leaves or other plant or vegetable material. For images of these packaged incenses click here. Since these brands are sold as herbs and incense, they have a wide variety of smells, including mint, strawberry, and blueberry. This sweet smell attracts the younger generation and also makes detecting it harder by parents, school personnel, and law enforcement. The price of these synthetic cannabinoids is very comparable to the price of marijuana and is packaged/sold in the same quantities (grams and ounces). Usually written on the packaging is “not for human consumption” and that is obviously to avoid any responsibility for illnesses or deaths associated with abusing this material.
The synthetic marijuana is used in the same manner as real marijuana. It is usually smoked by using a bowl, being rolled in a joint or blunt, or it can be ingested by mixing it with food (such as brownies) or made into soups. If you have never heard of this or believe it’s not that popular, search “smoking spice” on YouTube and you will find between 350-500 hits of kids and young adults exploiting and encouraging this new craze. One video even shows a young adult using a gas-mask to inhale this toxic substance. Unfortunately, these people using these synthetic cannabinoids have no clue what they are putting through their bloodstream, and that is what makes this so dangerous and gives it such a high probability for overdose and illness.

So what are these chemicals added and where do they come from? There are many different chemicals that are being added to these herbs/incenses but there are about 6 that are the most common. The chemical formulas/names are HU-200, HU-210, JWH-018, JWH-073, JWH-133, and CP-47,497 or known as cannabicyclohexanol. Unless you are a chemist or biologist, you do not need to know the entire genealogy of these chemicals. Simply put, these chemicals are powerful analgesics (pain killers), anti-convulsion drugs, and other cannabinoid receptor agonist drugs that give the human body the same side effects of being high. Most of these chemicals were generated in scientific laboratories in the mid 1900’s. Unfortunately, these chemicals were not created for this exact purpose and the long-term effects are unknown, which is another reason why the usage of these drugs is so dangerous. The addition of these chemicals were first discovered in these incenses in 2008 when border patrol and customs agents found and analyzed “Spice” that was coming into the county.

The reactions and side effects people get from using these synthetic cannabinoids are similar to that of marijuana, however, the potency of these drugs are 100-800 times more powerful than that of regular marijuana. The reason why this is not consistent and very dangerous is because these drugs are not regulated by the FDA, nor are they regulated for human consumption, and there is no guarantee how much or what chemical is thrown into the mix. Because the potency is so high, typical reactions reported by emergency room and hospital admissions involving these drugs are reported as: tachycardia (range of 110-150 beats a minute), elevated blood pressure (140-160/100-110 range), anxiety, numbness, tingling, vomiting, agitation to the point of sedation, tremors, seizures, and hallucinations. A typical marijuana high lasts only an hour or two, where these reactions tend to maintain themselves for 6 hours or more. According to the American Association of Poison Control Centers, there have been over 500 reported cases of adverse reactions and hospitalizations involving synthetic marijuana so far in 2010. In 2009, there were only 6. This statistic shows just how popular and increasingly dangerous this new trend really is. It also shows that the potency is increasing.

The reactions and side effects to the synthetic cocaine and other stimulants such as mephedrone are also very similar to the real drugs, but are often way more intense (the high...
beginning only after approximately 2 minutes and lasting up to 4 hours) and damaging side-effects such psychosis, loss of sleep for up to 5 days in a row, kidney and liver failure, flash-backs, paranoia, depression, and a constant feeling of low when not on the drug. There is little evidence of confirmed known deaths due to the synthetic cannabinoids, but some resources, especially in the U.K. do accredit deaths from the mephedrone. Several reputable news programs, including ABC News Prime-Time, has recently aired news stories regarding families around the United States that are being torn apart due to their children’s new legal addiction.

So what is the federal government going to do about this? As of October of 2010, these synthetic drugs (not just marijuana) are legal in all states but twelve. It is illegal in Kansas, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Missouri, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Oregon, Illinois, Michigan, and Kentucky. Currently, the DEA is working on emergency legislation that will ban the sale of all of these synthetic cannabinoids for a period of one year. In this year, they will analyze the chemicals inserted into the incenses/herbs and make a determination if the most commonly used chemicals in these drugs should be classified as scheduled-1 drugs (those drugs that have no medical purpose and have a high chance for abuse) such as heroine, GHB, and ecstasy. Other countries, such as Europe and Australia are also working on similar legislation, as this is not just a United States epidemic.

Being that these substances are still being researched and little is known of their capabilities for serious dependencies, the question of treatment also must be explored. A reputable drug and alcohol counseling agency in Harrisburg, PA, called Mazzitti & Sullivan, shed some light on this subject. They report that they have been seeing a small number of clients reporting the abuse of these above drugs (most commonly the synthetic cannabinoids) and are treating them as such addictions. They compare this addiction (being that the addiction is not to an illegal drug) to that of “huffing” or inhaling toxic substances such as glue or paint fumes. A problem that could arise is that of insurance companies paying for such services. Most clients who are in treatment are also being treated for other drugs (such as marijuana, cocaine, or alcohol) so the insurance is not an issue for these cases. Mazzitti & Sullivan also confirmed that they were just recently able to identify, through urinalysis, the presence of the synthetic cannabinoids by identifying the body’s breakdown of two of the six most common chemicals. This is very new and costly to do so.

So what is the main problem facing everyone who wants to control this new epidemic? The problem comes down to one word that has been repeated throughout this work: SYNTHETIC. Because all of the above incenses, plant foods, and bath salts that are being abused are synthetic, or being manufactured, once certain chemicals are outlawed and identified through urinalysis screenings, the companies will simply alter their production to elude this. It will be very difficult to stay ahead and predict what chemicals will be used next.
Since addicts are willing to spend money to finance these companies to keep ahead of the game, there appears to be no end in sight. It will be very interesting to see how the federal government, as well as local governments, handles this situation and hopefully, control or abolishment of these drugs is soon to come!!!

Synthetic Cocaine