



Dickinson-Iron District Health Department

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Re: Herbal Incense

There has been quite a bit of discussion lately about the use of herbal incense (synthetic marijuana) in the community. This follows on the heels of issues with bath salts and co-exists with an even newer local trend, abuse of a substance referred to by users as “plant food.” According to Dr. Frankovich, “The jargon has become a bit confusing and now is perhaps an appropriate time to review these substances and what we know about impact.”

Bath Salts: You may remember that patients began presenting to emergency rooms in Michigan due to intoxication with this substance (the chemical abbreviation is MDPV), in December of 2010. By February there were 25 severe cases on record in Michigan (22 of them in Marquette County), including one death. Affected persons had symptoms such as agitation, seizures, hallucinations and also, heart and kidney problems. Over 40% of patients were hospitalized and some required prolonged psychiatric hospitalization. The main mode of exposure was injection. The product was being sold by some “head shops” in Marquette and Houghton County. According to Frankovich, “It was the severe medical impact in some U.P. districts that enabled their local health departments to issue an Imminent Threat order that took it off the shelves, in the stores actively selling the product.” However, on-line sales have continued and sporadic cases are still presenting to Emergency Rooms across the U.P.

Herbal Incense: These substances are synthetic cannabinoids (i.e. synthetic marijuana), binding to the same receptors in the brain to which the active ingredient In marijuana (THC) binds. The difference is that there are ~140 slight variations of this chemical currently and they attach to the brain receptors with different intensity, thus the “high” can vary greatly with this product (exposure through smoking). Only 5 of the variants have been successfully banned at the federal level to date.

Although this substance has been having an impact in some local schools, hospitals in Marquette, Houghton and Dickinson-Iron Counties are not reporting severe medical cases in their facilities (unlike what was seen with bath salts), therefore excluding the ability to use a local Imminent Threat order at this time. The health department, in cooperation with area hospitals, continues to monitor the situation

for any changes. Nationally, there have been reports of acute side effects including: panic attacks, agitation, high heart rates, elevated blood pressure, anxiety, vomiting, hallucinations, and, in some cases, seizures. These products are sold widely on-line and in head shops or tobacco shops.

“Plant Food”: is more similar in effect to Bath Salts than to herbal incense. The active ingredient is an amphetamine-type drug called mephedrone. It is sold in similar venues to bath salts and just like its counterparts, it is marketed as “not for human consumption” to skirt regulatory laws although most users inject it. Although we are not yet seeing this widespread across the U.P., Dickinson County has reported a small number of cases locally in adults who appear to have purchased it on-line.

One thing is clear, these emerging substances will continue to present a challenge to government regulators, law enforcement, the medical community, schools and public health across the state and the country. So, what can be done? Solutions will likely come in many different forms. First, because this problem has such a broad public reach, it is important to try and create definitive solutions at the state and federal level.

To this end, the Dickinson-Iron District Health Department and other local health departments in Michigan, are working with the Michigan Department of Community Health to help craft meaningful legislation that will allow a timely response as these new products emerge....making it possible to quickly get them off the shelves of all retailers and to keep them off.

In addition to these legislative efforts, there must also be a focus on primary prevention, such as asset-building in our youth-- so that drug use of any kind is seen as an obstacle to the future they see for themselves and so that they have the tools to make sound choices and negotiate social pressures.

Assets are the strengths, or building blocks that youth need to grow up healthy, competent, and caring. Research tells us that youth with more assets experience more success in life and participate in fewer risk-taking behaviors. Asset-building is a strength based approach where youth are viewed as “the solution” rather than “the problem”.

The SEARCH Institute in Minneapolis, MN. has identified 40 developmental assets that include 20 external assets (supportive environment) and 20 internal assets (individual values). Assets will promote healthy thriving behaviors such as school success and impulse control and assets will protect youth against risk-taking behaviors such as drug use, alcohol use, or skipping school.

The good news is that any of us can be an asset-builder. Any person, youth or adult, that commits time, energy, and/or resources to making a difference in the community by promoting healthy youth development is an asset builder. For simple asset building ideas visit the Dickinson-Iron District Health Department’s website at www.didhd.org and view the Dickinson-Iron Youth Asset Report. This report outlines our local youth’s asset numbers as well as gives all of us asset-building ideas. For further information contact the Coordinators of the Dickinson-Iron Healthy Youth Coalition, Joyce Ziegler, RNC at the Health Department 774-1868 or 265-9913 or Casey McCormick at the Intermediate School District at 779-2695.

According to Dr. Frankovich, “It is encouraging to see the local community rally around this issue, actively looking for ways to protect our residents, particularly our youth, from these products that pose a threat not only to their health but also to their future. I see this community engagement as one of our strongest assets.”