

Drugs and driving don't mix

“Stimulants such as amphetamines constitute a large part of the problem”

Speed kills, as we know from the police and traffic authorities. But what about the recreational drug 'speed', can it impair driving too?

Studies by PhD candidate Beata Silber from the Drugs and Driving Research Unit at Swinburne's Centre for Neuropsychology indicate that low doses of dexamphetamine, or 'speed', can have serious effects on driving ability. In a controlled double blind trial of 20 adults,

Silber found that signalling, reaction time and stopping at red lights were all impaired by participants administered dexamphetamine, a drug prescribed for attention deficit disorder and known to be taken by truck drivers to keep them awake.

“We know that used recreationally, the dosage of amphetamine is generally much higher than that administered for this study,” Silber says. “So we can hypothesise that driving



impairment of recreational users would be even more severe than we found in our study.” One caveat is that her tests measured driving on a simulator two to two-and-a-half hours after the drug was taken, a time when most

recreational users are still partying.

Interestingly, impairment only occurred during daytime driving conditions. During night-time conditions, drivers with the same dose of the drug showed no such effects. Silber suspects this is a result

of perceptual-narrowing or tunnel vision, a phenomenon where attentional processes become overwhelmed, resulting in a reduced ability to process information at the periphery. As less peripheral information is processed at night due to poorer lighting, tunnelling may be less relevant to night driving.

Although there is a wide body of research on the effects of dexamphetamine on cognition and behaviour, the research on driving ability is limited, so the project will add significantly to the body of knowledge.

As road safety campaigns successfully target speed driving, seat belts and alcohol use, drug use is emerging as a major factor in road safety. The most recent surveys show that in Australia, drug use other than alcohol is responsible

for almost 25 percent of fatalities, indicating the need for roadside drug testing.

Stimulants such as amphetamines constitute a large part of this problem, along with cannabis and the combination of alcohol and other drugs.

A second aspect to Silber's study is to assess the accuracy of the three Standardised Field Sobriety Tests administered by Victoria Police to detect impairment among drivers under the influence of amphetamines. Disturbingly, initial data suggests that with dexamphetamine use, the tests are a poor indicator, identifying impairment in only 10 percent of cases. **Q**

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Fashion parade during this year's Sydney Road street party.
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