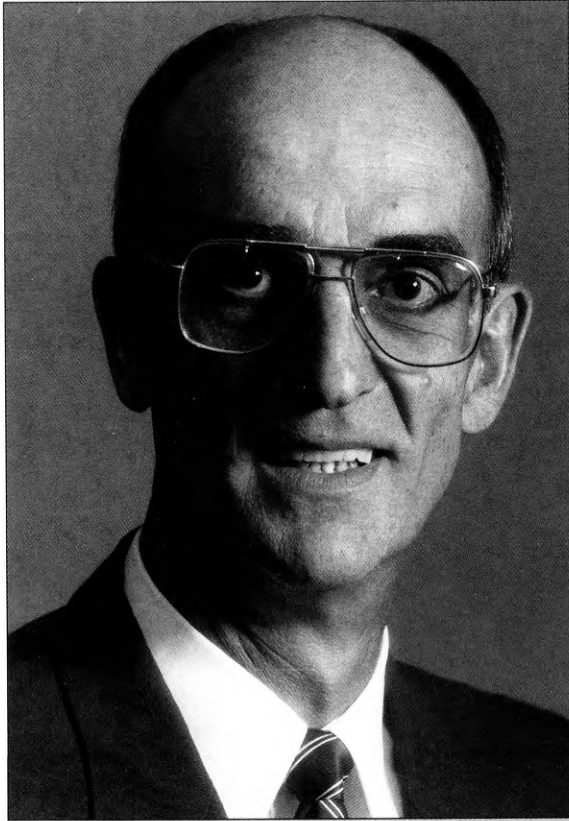


Amphetamine abuse growing in new drug trends



By Janice Jarrett

As we approach the end of the millennium, one of the new trends becoming apparent in the illicit drug trade is a move from traditional illicit drug abuse and trafficking patterns in both the nature of substance abuse and its sources of origin.

While the threat posed by drugs such as cannabis, heroin and cocaine continues to be strong, there is an increasing demand for synthetic drugs, particularly amphetamines, accompanied by a significant change in the geographical routes of the illicit drug trade.

The AFP's Director, International, David Schramm, said recently that lesser-developed countries which traditionally had been the source of many illicit drugs such as cannabis and opiates, were now confronted with an influx of synthetic drugs such as 'ecstasy' from countries in Europe, many of which have been previously regarded mainly as 'user' countries. Consequently, the fight against amphetamine abuse has now become a priority in some South-East Asian countries.

AFP Director International David Schramm

The 21st meeting of the Heads of National Drug Law Enforcement (HONLEA), Asia and Pacific, held in Manila late last year under the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP) was told that while the Asian region remained the world's primary source for the cultivation of opium poppy, production of opium and manufacture of heroin, the problem of amphetamine manufacture in Asia continued to grow.

The Australian delegation to the conference included Mr Schramm, the National Director Border Management of the Australian Customs Service, Les Jones, and AFP Liaison Officer in Manila, Kevin McTavish. Similar regional HONLEA conferences are held also in South America, Africa and Europe. Mr Schramm said

that the Asia-Pacific meeting is probably the most significant as it represents the region which produces the majority of the commonly abused illicit drugs, with the exception of cocaine, and contained populous countries where the problem of drug abuse was rising annually.

Representatives at the conference were from 33 countries, three territories, and 13 observer states and organisations with the significant addition of representatives from some central Asian countries previously part of the former USSR.

Delegates heard that the increased incidence of stimulants abuse, mainly methamphetamine, was concerning for authorities as they had to use limited resources previously dedicated to heroin investigations in combating the rising problem. Investigations involving both heroin and metamphetamine were increasing, and seizures of other stimulants, such as MDMA and similar derivatives were being reported with increasing frequency by a number of countries.

In some instances, tighter government controls were disrupting established opium and heroin production practices and trafficking routes, but traffickers were finding alternative routes. There had been a dramatic increase in the amount of illicit drugs seized in China, which was partly attributable to enforcement activities by the government of Burma (Myanmar) which has disrupted some established opium and heroin production and trafficking routes. Traffickers have found the alternative route through the Yunnan Province in China to be more attractive.

The continual changes in trafficking methods required a constant information exchange between drug law enforcement agencies in the Asian region and led to increased cooperation between countries with priority being given by UNDCP to improving cooperation between Thailand, China, Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Among the drug hauls reported, Burma found about 3,000kg of ephedrine (a precursor for amphetamine production) on its border with China in October 1996 while another 31kg was found near its border with Laos. Significantly, amphetamine was found being manufactured in remote laboratories which previously had been known for producing heroin.

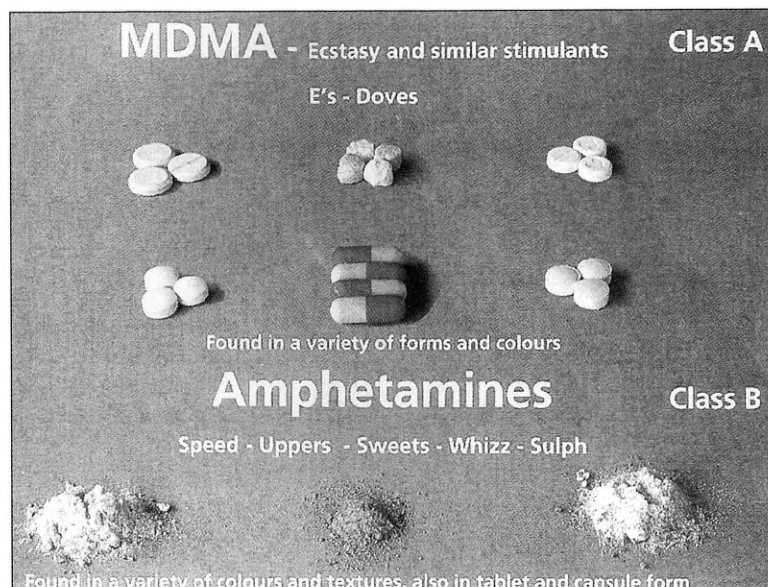
Thailand was detecting the increased manufacture and use of amphetamines as were Korea, China and the Philippines. In fact, during the conference the Philippines National Police seized a consignment of more than 200kgs of amphetamine, known locally as Shabu, together with 1.4kgs of heroin.

"This very much reflects the Australian situation and is consistent with reports made to the Interpol General Assembly," Mr Schramm said.

State authorities in Australia had taken measures including amendments to legislation to combat the problem. Reporting mechanisms have been established to detect illegal or suspected sale of precursor chemicals and the counter-measures were producing good results.

Although Asian countries are experiencing increased demand for stimulants, Pacific countries appeared not to have the same problem. However, the possibility of the presence of stimulants was not ruled out because of insufficient training on detection methods.

The conference concluded that there was a possibility that the problem could spread to other countries in the Pacific and that the situation



Amphetamine and amphetamine analogues

should be monitored. The availability of information, and regional and international cooperation, were seen as the key to monitoring the possible spread of the problem to other parts of the Pacific. The meeting agreed that measures adopted by Australia and New Zealand to combat stimulant-related problems should be used as a model for other countries in the area.

Also discussed was the use by drug traffickers of 'underground' banking systems in countries such as India, Pakistan and Hong Kong with briefings presented by delegates of these countries. Systems such as the 'unregulated remittance exchange system' in Hong Kong, which operates widely through general trading companies, gold shops and various commercial interests and is not illegal, is used extensively for legitimate trading, the conference was told. Remittance centres generally did not question the source of funds. However, there was no proposal to regulate such centres and Hong Kong authorities had experienced difficulty in securing successful prosecutions for money laundering because of the need to prove that the source of funds was known to the trader.

"The problem of developing effective counter-measures for money laundering will be around for some time yet," Mr Schramm said, "but the work being done by Ric McDonell of the Financial Action Task Force (Asian Secretariat) is taking us in the right direction of getting improved regional coordination."

The proliferation of drug trafficking and abuse in the Asia-Pacific region and throughout the world continued to raise concern, and no country could address the drug control problem in isolation, the conference agreed.