

INTERVIEW Beating the 'P' pandemic

Alex has spent half of his life in prison – on the right side of the bars. After 24 years as a prison officer, there is nothing he doesn't know about offenders. Chillingly, what Alex does know above all else, is that 'P' – methamphetamine or crystal meth – is a rampant evil affecting all levels of our society, fuelling a new era of crime and violence over the past 10 years. But there is no organised movement to counter it, to assist addicts who do seek help or to educate our most vulnerable – the young. Alex is on a one-man mission to reach as many youngsters as he can, using his passion and the power of music.

What is 'P' and how does its use affect people?

Methamphetamine is manufactured from a concoction of chemicals, including rat poison, battery acid and drain cleaners. It is a powerful central nervous system stimulant that affects dopamine and is so addictive that it becomes the central 'God' in the lives of users, above their families, their friends. There is an intense, fanatical devotion to P. This is not a drug that can be 'tried out' – one dose and a person is doomed – their normal life and that of their family is over. P abusers are the hardest to treat of all drug users. The road to get off it is rough. It can take up to three years to recover and those who do will tell you that the craving never leaves them. It is an endless misery. The brain of a P user after several years is like instant pudding, you could put your finger through it. The user suffers physically, emotionally and psychologically. They develop terrible sores and pick their skin off because of an unending itch that makes them think there are insects under their skin. The term 'Ancient youth' is used because young people and children on P age 10 years. In 18 months of using, a beautiful young lady, a healthy young man are destroyed, their teeth go, they waste away, they look like the walking dead. The psychological effects too are horrifying – schizophrenia-like symptoms, rage, paranoia, hallucinations. People may seek help when they hit the bottom, but unless help is available when that window opens, they can slip away again. Users, police officers, doctors and the families of users will tell you it's near impossible to get off the P Death Ride. Many more take their own lives. It is better named Crystal Death than Crystal Meth.

Who is at risk?

Everybody, especially the young, who are vulnerable because they don't know what it means to take P. Friends may say "try it once," but once is all it takes to be hooked. Marijuana spiked with P is a huge, largely unrealised danger. P never used to be a problem in New Zealand because there were so many other drugs out there – but when it did hit the streets here 10 years ago, it was huge. It affected people from all walks of life, not just the 'lower echelons'. Businessmen took it because they could work for hours without sleep, so their productivity soared. But then their profits started draining away into buying the drug – the price goes up once a person is hooked. The effects of sleep deprivation and paranoia take over. 90% lose their businesses and jobs, their families, their way of life. The only businesses that do well are those white collar criminals who fund this death trade – there is huge money involved. P babies born to user mothers can be born P addicts, with brain damage and behavioural disorders. This can happen to anyone – your child, spouse, family member.

Tell us about the link between P and crime. Penalties for the use of P, selling and manufacturing are becoming more severe, but once someone is hooked on P they really don't care about legal penalties. Nobody in society is safe from the effects of P. It alters people's behaviour so severely that their families suffer and so do those who become theft victims as users try to support their addiction. Then there are those in the way of random

acts of violence. I want to see people before court identified as P users. There needs to be a nationwide education campaign showing the effects of P on people – no hiding it away, no soft peddle. Tell it like it is. It's shocking, but people need to know. How many of the violent offenders before the courts are P users? Which ones committed horrific, bizarre crimes under the influence of P? How many drivers involved in road crashes are users? Many addicts kill themselves to escape their horrifying life on the Death Train – let the cause of their deaths be known. Hospitals will tell you how they revive users, bringing them back from death several times.

What was your experience of P in prison?

A large proportion of offenders are there because of P related crime. I held wananga in prison and began giving prisoners poems I had written about P. A lot of them were in awe that somebody was doing something, and it encouraged them to write down their own experiences. Their stories are heart breaking – they are shattered by the effects of their actions on their families. People talked to me because I cared, and there was nowhere else to turn. Since the closure of mental health facilities, many users who would have been looked after there have ended up in prison. Imprisonment is not the answer. Treatment is about 1/10 of the cost of putting a P user in gaol. The assets from crime should be seized and put back into education to stop the P market and to help those who are already victims,

What can be done to stop P?

As long as there is big money to be made, there will be manufacturers and suppliers, so we MUST educate every person in NZ – if you haven't started – DON'T! That is the message I am taking to youth groups, schools, parent groups – anyone who will listen. I have put my poems to music – because music is a major way young people communicate – and have designed T shirts to get the anti-P message out there. These attract a lot of attention on the streets. A major problem is that there are few treatment facilities. Users are lucky if they can get a rehab place through Alcohol and Drug and private rehab is pricey, only for those with the money to get help. Others seeking help turn up at Palmerston North Street Van from as far away as Auckland and Christchurch, but this voluntary group only have 14 beds

