

SORTED OR DISTORTED?

Roger Matthews re-views the Guardian debate on Ecstasy.

It is an indication of the significance which illicit forms of drug taking - particularly Ecstasy - have achieved in this country that the Guardian decided to sponsor a public meeting to discuss the topic in central London.

Spurred by what the organisers saw as a polarised and badly informed debate the aim of the meeting was, according to Chair **Jez Nelson** of TV and radio fame, to replace the celluloid fantasies which have become associated with Ecstasy by a more realistic and rational debate.

Natalie Melton from Lifeline claimed that her organisation spoke the 'real truth'. Lifeline distributed a pamphlet in the meeting entitled 'Telling the Truth About Drugs' which the audience were encouraged to read while they waited patiently for the delayed proceedings to get under way. **Paul Flynn**, Labour MP for Newport West decried government hypocrisy and cowardice on the subject of drugs. Presenting himself as the 'honest broker' who was able to speak candidly about drug use he informed the audience that, despite the recent media focus on deaths resulting from taking Ecstasy, in fact only 34 people have died as a result of taking the drug over the past five years compared to the hundreds and thousands who have died as a result of drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes.

David Arnold of the Health Education Authority claimed that his approach was based on 'robust' independent research and therefore was informed and objective, while **Caroline Coon** who was the founder of the charity 'Release' also pointed to what she sees as Government hypocrisy in outlawing Ecstasy while condoning the use of much more harmful substances. Finally, **Boy George** as self-confessed ex-drug user spoke from the reality of personal experience. He stated unequivocally that although drug taking might be pleasurable: "You know when you take them that they will fuck you up".

A pathologist's view

Unfortunately the realities of the panel

members did not coincide. Medical opinion in the form of **Dr Chris Milroy**, who in his capacity as a clinical pathologist has examined a number of cases in which the cause of death was linked to taking Ecstasy, was called upon to cast some scientific light on the matter. On the basis of his detailed examinations he was able to state that in his opinion taking Ecstasy can lead to heart disease, liver failure and can cause mood swings in long term users. However, the authority which comes from being able to dissect corpses without fainting or vomiting was undermined by his concluding remark that there is "no solid evidence of long term damage from Ecstasy use alone" and "that it is not entirely certain whether death in those cases was the result of the drug or contamination". The



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uncertainties about the harmful effects of Ecstasy were also put into perspective by Dr Milroy's concluding remark that the drug which is most commonly associated with fatalities in his experience is alcohol.

Although most of the panellists seemed to agree that the health risks commonly associated with Ecstasy tend to be overplayed in the media, no-one, with the exception of Caroline Coon, actually wanted to publicly condone or encourage its use. Instead they trotted out in turn the familiar strategies of harm minimisation and the provision of accessible information as the main objectives of intervention.

Vox Populi

At this point the discussion was opened up to people in the audience who were on average ten to fifteen years younger than the panel members. Although the comments from the audience were diverse as might be expected, most

contributions came closer to the 'reality' of Ecstasy use than the contributions from the panel. Some of the audience questioned the significance of fatalities in assessing the dangers of different forms of drug use and suggested that other criteria should be employed. Others questioned the reliance on information as a method of addressing the issue arguing that people still smoked although they knew the probable effects of smoking cigarettes. Calling for more and more information was seen as a possible strategy by which both drug users and agencies distanced themselves from the known effects.

Some members of the audience were critical of those clubs which still turn the water taps off and charge £2 or £3 for a bottle of water. Others were also sceptical of those night club owners who do provide water and medical assistance but clearly turn a blind eye to dealers operating on their premises.

In one of the most enlightening contributions to the discussion one woman in her early twenties who stated that she had been taking Ecstasy regularly for the past six months pointed out that it has three very important attributes. The first is that it enhances your physical capacity and helps to keep you going all night long. Second, it helps you

to feel positive and friendly towards others and this generates a good communal feeling in those clubs in which Ecstasy is widely taken. Thirdly, it helps to break down inhibitions and allows you to develop deeper intimate relations. This woman pointed out that she did not smoke and hardly drank and that she worked very hard during the week and that taking Ecstasy helped her to 'get the max' out of the weekend.

At the point at which the discussion started warming up the curtain fell. At the end of the night, despite a few spirited performances, the boundaries between fantasy and reality remained as blurred as ever.

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The Guardian debate took place at the MGM cinema in Shaftesbury Avenue on 29th May 1996.