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# BZP and New Zealand's alternative approach to prohibition



In this special issue dedicated to New Psychoactive Substances, Journals Editor Paul Trevorrow discusses with Matt Bowden of Stargate, New Zealand, the role of benzylpiperazine (BZP) as a safer alternative to methamphetamine and the Class D approach to the regulation of recreational drugs in New Zealand. The following interview is a fully citable transcript from the podcast published by *Drug Testing and Analysis* available at <http://specandsepnw.libsyn.com/>

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**What is the history of BZP in New Zealand and how did it all start?** In 2000 we started supplying BZP as an alternative for amphetamine addicts following the emergence of various issues with methamphetamine use in the country. Over the following eight years, over 26 million BZP pills were consumed by 400 000 consumers on 10 million occasions. There were no recorded deaths or serious, lasting injuries caused by the BZP consumption and it did reduce the demand for other drugs. We trialled industry self-regulation. This was largely successful, but there were some manufacturers who made the pills too strong. This required government intervention in setting limits – on how strong the pills can be – and manufacturing standards to make the compound safer. BZP was made illegal in the lead-up to an election but forged the basis for a new legislative structure to regulate safer drug alternatives in the future.

**Who made the first BZP and put it into capsules for human consumption?** BZP's history in humans goes back to researchers in the early the 1970s testing on amphetamine addicts. BZP was identified as the active metabolite of two different antidepressants in the 1980s and, based on that history, Stargate started making it available as a replacement drug to amphetamine addicts in the year 2000.

**Can you explain to us the class D approach in New Zealand?** When you make a drug illegal, you create a black market; you lose quality control and that makes it more dangerous for consumers.

In the opposite extreme, an unregulated market with no laws would be equally hazardous. In New Zealand, we are fine-tuning a more advanced policy measure where we have a new schedule for low-risk psychotropic drugs which are not made illegal and hence not given to the black market. Instead we have regulations around dosage, quality control, manufacturing standards, age limits, and restrictions on where and how the product can be sold and marketed. This process enables government control over the drugs consumers are using and allows the availability of safer drug alternatives. These safer alternatives, in turn, reduce the demand for more dangerous black market drugs. We view this as being a safer policy model.

**BZP is viewed as the safe alternative to methamphetamine. What evidence is there for this?** A lot of research has been performed on BZP. There have been millions of exposures over eight and half years in New Zealand. The government did provide funding for research and a thorough independent risk analysis was carried out in review of all the available data (available at [mattbowden.com](http://mattbowden.com)). In general, the peer-reviewed research agreed that it was a low-risk activity. From treatment centres, we learned that consumers were not presenting with addiction and research into possible neurotoxicity revealed that BZP looks to have a safer profile than

methamphetamine. We also reviewed accident and emergency data from hospitals to learn that there were no presentations from people taking the recommended dose. Presentations where individuals had taken too much BZP resulted in the patients being discharged without medical intervention. Users have to make sure that they are not cocktailing BZP with other drugs. The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drugs Abuse also came to the same conclusion – that BZP is a low-risk drug – encouraging member states to regulate accordingly but I do not know of any countries that have a legislative structure that can regulate without prohibition. So, as a result, BZP remains illegal in most countries

at this time. New Zealand is a small flexible nation and we see it as our role to develop policy models which other countries can adopt and that is something that we can all work progressively towards together.

**Matt Bowden**  
Stargate, New Zealand

**Paul Trevorrow**  
Wiley-Blackwell