

Piperazines: a new class of drug of abuse has landed in Hong Kong

The pattern of substance abuse varies between different places and is ever-changing. Ecstasy and ketamine are two relative newcomers that have stayed and caused much harm. Emerging abuse of therapeutic substances should be identified in order to prevent its proliferation. Piperazines are a group of synthetic chemicals with psychoactive properties. They are popular party drugs elsewhere and were once available legally; they have only recently been listed as controlled substances in some countries.^{1,2} We report the first local clinical case here.

A 28-year-old man with a history of substance abuse presented to a hospital with tachycardia and chest discomfort. A broad-spectrum toxicology screen was performed on a urine sample and found several unidentified compounds, as well as ketamine and cocaine metabolites.³ Further analysis confirmed that they were 1-(3-trifluoromethylphenyl)-piperazine (TFMPP) and its metabolites. The patient recovered spontaneously and was discharged.

1-(3-Trifluoromethylphenyl)-piperazine is a serotonin receptor agonist with a mild hallucinogenic effect. When it is taken with another piperazine

derivative, benzyl piperazine, the effects are enhanced and mimic those of ecstasy.⁴ Adverse reactions to piperazines include vomiting, headache, palpitations, anxiety, insomnia, confusion, irritability and tremors. An association with grand mal seizures had also been reported.²

In addition to this first clinical case, TFMPP has also been found recently in locally seized street drugs.⁵ As they are not currently listed as controlled drugs, the importation, distribution, and selling of piperazines is not illegal. All concerned parties should take note of this new threat.

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