

Amphetamine gets the job done

February 20 2015, by Amalie Kvame Holm

Drugs are usually associated with vulnerable social groups. New research reveals that amphetamine, however, is used by some in physically demanding manual jobs - to sustain long working hours.

A new study from the University of Oslo has found that amphetamine is often used by men with physically strenuous jobs on the margins of the labour market.

"I love working. Amphetamine use is about working harder and keeping the tempo up. I worked extremely effectively."

Thus a painter explained why he used amphetamine. Several of his colleagues also used the drug. They snorted amphetamine in the morning before work and during their lunch break at noon, to be effective and work as quickly as possible.

Surprising results

Willy Pedersen, Professor at the Department of Sociology and Human Geography and expert on substance abuse is one of the researchers behind the study. He is surprised by the findings.

"We connect drug use with marginal users. Amphetamine, however, is used by fairly conventional groups, with mainstream social values. It is a hazardous substance that is often used by ordinary people," he says.

The study was conducted by Pedersen in cooperation with Sveinung

Sandberg, Professor at the Department of Criminology and Sociology, both at the University of Oslo and Heith Copes at the University of Alabama.

They interviewed 55 Norwegian amphetamine users. The article High Speed: Amphetamine Use in the Context of Conventional Culture is now published in the journal Deviant Behavior.

Three user groups

The researchers found three user groups: young men at parties use the drug to regulate alcohol intoxication and keep the party going. Amphetamines are also used for self-medication by some people with an ADHD diagnosis. The third group are workers, often in irregular jobs in construction, the fishing industry, transport or cleaning firms.

A typical scenario would be that workers in a small business in tough competition for contracts would use amphetamines to work more efficiently, take on extra shifts or to get assignments completed on time.

"One advantage of amphetamine is that it is not so easy to discover that someone is using it. Several users argued that neither supervisors at work nor family had noticed anything. It does not smell and it increases energy, concentration and effort - at least in the short term," says Pedersen.

Secret and effective

Merely the fact that this drug can be used in secret was part of the appeal for these users. This separates the substance from other drugs.

"I used it for over a year without my wife finding out. I took one dose in

the morning, another during the day, ate and slept at night. Everything worked well. It was work, work, work," another man in the study said.

In addition, amphetamine is cheap, and is often called the "poor man's cocaine," according to Pedersen. Amphetamine use spread through a number of working environments.

"New workers might notice that some of their colleagues kept up a higher tempo without getting tired. Several were introduced to the substance by their workmates," says the researcher.

Some informants had used the drug for several years.

"But after a while many users began injecting the drug instead of snorting it, because it is more effective. Gradually, problems began to appear. They could not sleep and lost their appetites," says Pedersen.

Mothers

The majority of users are men, but some women too use amphetamine at work. One of these had a small cleaning company:

"When I use amphetamines, I can take on two extra jobs. I work and work, unable to say no. And I think: I just have to finish it. It helps to use a little amphetamine."

Several of the women were concerned that their amphetamine use would affect their children. Paradoxically, some mothers began to trade the drug in order to make ends meet. Several of them were prosecuted, and some lost custody of their children.

"Even when the women were in prison, several of them described the use of amphetamine as a way to cope with both work and family life.

Amphetamine enabled them to run their homes and cope with an exhausting daily routine," says Pedersen.

Historical use of the drug

Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. The Allies were initially shocked by the speed of the invasion and how effectively the German soldiers fought.

"The soldiers fought day after day without sleeping. We now know that the German Army and Air Force took 35 million amphetamine tablets during that first autumn of the war," says Pedersen.

Amphetamine was developed in the medical laboratories of modern industrial society. It was a legal medicine, and from the 1930s was marketed as a treatment for depression and to increase energy. During WW2 the drug was first used by the Axis powers, before the Allies also followed. In the 1950s amphetamine was marketed as a slimming aid. US President John F. Kennedy used amphetamine to stay awake during periods of high political pressure, for back pain and to prevent exhaustion.

"At one time almost ten per cent of Americans were using amphetamine. The same pattern was seen in England. And in Sweden its use was widespread. Eventually as the side effects became better known and the authorities tightened control of distribution the use of amphetamine declined. Amphetamine is a stimulant drug that has a number of side effects and that is strongly addictive," says Pedersen.

Rendering harmless

" It is easy to imagine that drugs are something "others" are doing.

Admittedly, many amphetamine users are eventually affected by the drug and the lifestyle, but the most striking thing in our study was how "normal" many of the users were. The use of the [drug](#) reflects solid values that many people in society share - namely "[work](#) hard" and "party hard," says Pedersen.

Some informants were introduced to amphetamines while still teenagers.

"Amphetamine is at its most available where alcohol consumption is at its greatest. Moreover, we see a correlation between [amphetamine](#) use, harsh working conditions and the grey economy. Those who move house for you very cheaply or renovate your bathroom for a lower price than their competitors may be using amphetamines to keep going strong," says Pedersen.

Provided by University of Oslo

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