

A photograph of a nightclub scene. The lighting is predominantly green, creating a hazy, atmospheric effect. In the foreground, the dark silhouettes of several people are visible, some with their arms raised, suggesting they are dancing. The background shows the interior of a club with structural elements like railings and other lights, though they are less distinct due to the green tint and motion blur.

High as a Kiwi

What happens if you just say no to drug prohibition? New Zealand is about to find out – and the rest of the world is watching. Michael Slezak reports



Around 30 million people take ecstasy-like drugs every year

“I’ve tried probably 150 different psychoactive chemicals,” the man with the Israeli accent tells me over the phone. “So I have a very, er, refined palate.”

Known to me simply as Dr Z, the man is a mathematician who used to design sleeping pills for a major pharmaceutical company. The drugs he designs these days are more likely to keep you awake. His most famous creation is mephedrone, or “meow meow”, which was briefly the world’s most famous legal high.

Drugs like mephedrone usually slip onto the market via shadowy underground networks. Dr Z first tries his creations himself before recruiting willing human guinea pigs from the online “psychonaut” community.

But this clandestine system may soon be a thing of the past. *New Scientist* understands that Dr Z is now testing a number of drugs in rigorous scientific studies, conducted by mainstream pharmaceutical labs and costing hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The trials are the result of a radical shake-up in drug policy in New Zealand. Last year its government passed a law that will allow new recreational drugs to be sold openly as long as they meet certain safety standards. Before long, Dr Z hopes his drugs will be on sale there, alongside alcohol and tobacco – taxed, regulated and entirely legal.

This doesn’t mean that New Zealand is legalising drugs: far from it. Existing illegal drugs won’t change their status. Nevertheless, the law is a decisive break with prohibition, a policy that has had a stranglehold on international drug enforcement for more than 50 years.

Breaking ranks

Other countries, too, are breaking ranks on prohibition, leading some to claim that the entire edifice is crumbling. At the very least, New Zealand’s radical experiment could provide some answers to the long-running and bitter arguments about whether banning drugs prevents or causes terrible harm.

If prohibition’s aim is to prevent people from taking drugs, it isn’t very successful. In 2011, an estimated 300 million people worldwide took illegal drugs, up 18 per cent on 2008. Even the world’s top drug enforcers struggle to put a positive spin on this number. “We have to admit that, globally, the demand for drugs has not been substantially reduced,” wrote Yury Fedotov, executive director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, in last year’s World Drug Report.

Other figures are equally damning. According to some estimates, the US has ➤

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