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eBay for Drugs: The Internet An Open Market for Illegal Drugs

Illegal drugs are now regularly being bought and sold on online social networking sites, with such cases growing at as much as 3000% a month. Online forums such as Silk Road and Facebook, are now a haven for drug sellers and buyers, where anything from LSD to pot is being traded on a daily basis. In the past drug deals have always had to involve some kind of a physical transaction between buyer and seller which involves at least an element of risk for both parties, but terrifyingly people are now able to order illicit drugs at the click of a button.

There is increasing evidence that a new, more efficient type of pusher is emerging who will use websites such as Facebook to connect with clients. What is particularly worrying is that the police are virtually powerless to prevent these transactions and the internet has made drugs more available to vulnerable young people than ever before.

The Cabin in Chiang Mai is a state of the art treatment centre in Northern Thailand which deals with addicts from all over the world. In recent months the staff have noticed an alarming increase in the number of clients who report that they were able to easily order drugs on the internet.

Alistair Mordey, the Programme Director and Head Counsellor at The Cabin comments:

"There is a close correlation between the availability of illegal drugs in an area and the number of addicts. Our counsellors talk to our clients about every facet of their addiction in order to help them overcome it and it is amazing how many people are telling us that they can now order drugs from the internet."

Drug users and drug dealers are using the internet to connect on a greater scale than ever before and the world wide web is in danger of becoming an open market for illegal and potentially addictive drugs.

Drugs for Sale on Facebook

One young Australian man undergoing treatment at The Cabin talked about how he was able to get hold of absolutely anything he wanted just by logging into Facebook,

'When I was in Perth, I could just go onto Facebook and order what I wanted, 20 minutes later the drugs would arrive. Dealers are always online. We used to use a code, so you never ask for drugs. Different flavoured ice creams and how many scoops would mean how much of a particular drug I wanted.'

Other former addicts reported that depending on the Facebook status of a dealer they would be able to judge whether they were 'holding' drugs or not. Facebook is open to abuse of this nature because it is easy to set up a fake profile and then to start to add potential customers as friends. By using pre arranged signals, such as referring to hard drugs by harmless names such as ice cream, the dealer is able to interact with drug users online without drawing attention to the illicit nature of the transactions.

Introducing Bitcoin Currency

Another even more worrying development for those engaged in the fight against drugs, is the introduction of the bitcoin and the increase in the use of websites such as Silk Road. The bitcoin is an internet currency which allows 'transactions to be made totally anonymously.

The value of the bitcoin has increased dramatically largely, it is believed, due to the currency's popularity among the criminal fraternity. Silk Road is an anonymous online market place which has been described as 'ebay' for illegal drugs. The majority of transactions on this website are believed to involve contraband and it recently drew the wrath of US Senator Charles Schumer who declared that, 'It's a certifiable one-stop shop for illegal drugs that represents the most brazen attempt to peddle drugs online that we have ever seen. It's more brazen than anything else by light years.'

Alastair Mordey continues: 'Of course when drugs are more accessible we see an increase in the amount of people using them. An addict will do anything he can to get his hands on drugs but the path to addiction almost always begins with a period of experimentation. If drugs aren't readily available then potential addicts are unable to experiment conversely an increase in the availability of drugs will definitely see a long term increase in the quantity of addicts. "

Rehabilitation is a key aspect of the battle against drugs and the work which treatment centres such as The Cabin do definitely helps to reduce the quantity of problem drug users. Prevention is still the main priority of any coherent drugs strategy but law enforcement agencies which have for years worked to try and keep drugs off the street are finding themselves powerless to patrol the internet.

Editor's Notes:

- Alastair Mordey (BA hons, RDAP, ADAP) is the Programme Director and Head Counsellor at The Cabin, an addiction treatment centre in Chiang Mai. He is a certified and accredited addiction counsellor with over 10 years' experience working in treatment services
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