

17 December 2007

Hon Jim Anderton
Associate Minister of Health
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON

Dear Minister,

**Advice from the Expert Advisory Committee on Drugs on salvia
divinorum**

At its meeting on 30 August 2007, the Expert Advisory Committee on Drugs (The Committee) discussed the hallucinogenic plant salvia divinorum, and an appropriate classification of this substance under the Misuse of Drugs legislative framework. The full assessment on salvia divinorum is attached.

Background

Salvia divinorum is a member of the sage family of plants. The leaves of salvia divinorum can be smoked or chewed to induce the substance's potent, short lasting hallucinogenic effects. The substance originates from Mexico and is documented to have been used in traditional spiritual practices for many centuries.

More recently, use of salvia divinorum has spread into Western cultures and the substance has gained international popularity as a legal hallucinogen. Salvia divinorum is easily accessible within New Zealand from a variety of 'party pill' shops, and also on-line vendors. Commercially sold preparations of salvia divinorum primarily take the form of concentrated plant extracts containing varying strengths of the psychoactive compound Salvinorin-A. These extracts contain a concentrated tar-like crude extract mixed with the raw leaves of the salvia divinorum plant and the resulting product is substantially stronger than the raw leaves used to produce it.

The effects of smoking an extract of salvia divinorum are generally felt instantaneously and subside within 10 to 40 minutes. These effects vary depending on the quantity or strength of the extract consumed. A low dose may result in colors and textures becoming more pronounced, short-term memory impairment and laughter. Higher doses result in closed and open-eyed visual hallucinations, auditory hallucinations, impaired space perception and loss of contact with consensual reality. Higher doses still have the potential to cause a loss of consciousness.

Australia was the first country in the world to ban salvia divinorum and Salvinorin-A in 2002. Several European countries have also enacted restrictions and/or prohibitions regarding salvia divinorum, each with varying degrees of control. In the United States, Federal legislation to classify salvia divinorum as a controlled drug has previously been defeated, but a number of states have placed their own restrictions on the substance.

In New Zealand, salvia divinorum is not currently controlled by the Misuse of Drugs legislative framework or the Medicines Act 1981 and subject only to voluntary industry self-regulation.

Expert Advisory Committee on Drugs Comment

The Committee discussed salvia divinorum and outlined three options;

- 1) Monitor the use and harms of this substance and note that the pending review of the Misuse of Drugs Act may provide for better control of this substance in due course.
- 2) Advise you that salvia divinorum be classified as a Restricted Substance under the Misuse of Drugs Amendment Act 2005 in order for restrictions to be placed on the substance while further monitoring is undertaken.
- 3) Provide advice that salvia divinorum be classified as a controlled drug under the Schedules of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1975.

After careful consideration the Committee agreed that salvia divinorum did have a potential to cause harm. However, the Committee did not consider that the research to date demonstrated a level of risk that would warrant classification of salvia divinorum as a controlled drug ie at least a moderate level of harm. The Committee did agree that there would be merit in limiting the availability of salvia divinorum preparations to people 18 years or over.

Therefore, the Committee's advice to you is:

- **that salvia divinorum be classified as a Restricted Substance under the Misuse of Drugs Amendment Act 2005 while further research into the prevalence and harms of the substance is undertaken.**

The Committee also noted the importance of a low profile approach to this classification, as increased media coverage would likely lead to an increased risk of harm resulting from a heightened awareness and use of this substance.

Finally, this is an opportunity to reiterate the previous advice of the Committee that, despite the pending classification of benzylpiperazine (BZP) as a class C1 controlled drug, work should continue to further develop the regulatory framework and enforcement capacity to support the Restricted Substance provisions of the Misuse of Drugs Amendment Act 2005. This will be of additional importance if salvia divinorum is classified as a Restricted Substance.

Yours sincerely

Ashley Bloomfield (Dr)
Chair
Expert Advisory Committee on Drugs

Encl. Minutes of 30 August 2007 Expert Advisory Committee on Drugs meeting.
Assessment of salvia divinorum.