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**NEW PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES A FACTOR
IN SOME PRISONER DEATHS, SAYS OMBUDSMAN**

The use of new psychoactive substances (NPS) is suspected to have played a part in the deaths of some prisoners, said Nigel Newcomen, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO). Today he published a bulletin on the lessons that can be learned from PPO investigations into deaths of prisoners where the use of NPS-type drugs was suspected.

This report looks at 19 deaths in prison between April 2012 and September 2014 where the prisoner was known, or strongly suspected, to have been using NPS-type drugs before their death. NPS are difficult to define precisely but broadly refer to drugs intended to imitate the effects of cannabis, stimulants or hallucinogens. This report focuses on synthetic cannabinoids, including 'Spice' and 'Black Mamba'. The use of such drugs is proving difficult to detect and manage, with hundreds of variations in chemical make-up. Hundreds of compounds used in the drugs are now banned, but even when legal in the community, possession of NPS is against Prison Rules.

PPO investigations have found that:

- the strength and effect of NPS are unpredictable and can vary considerably. There have been reports of prisoners, including at least one of the men who died, being given 'spiked' cigarettes by others who wanted to test new batches of NPS to gauge the effect before taking it themselves;

- there have been examples of erratic, violent and out of character behaviour when prisoners had been using NPS. One prisoner became physically sick, behaved strangely, and then died of a heart attack later the same day;
- for some people, NPS can be a trigger for self-harm, and although it is difficult to establish any direct causal links with self-inflicted deaths, a number were believed to be among prisoners using synthetic cannabis;
- other prisoners suspected of taking NPS were found incoherent and unable to stand up properly, and there are published reports of patients needing emergency treatment for heart problems, high blood pressure, psychosis and seizures following NPS use; and
- as well as the possible physical and mental effects of taking NPS, there are associated problems of debt and bullying.

The lessons from the bulletin are that:

- prison staff should be given information about NPS and be aware of the signs that could indicate a prisoner is taking them;
- governors need to make sure that NPS are addressed by effective local drug supply reduction and violence reduction strategies;
- drug treatment services should identify prisoners with issues arising from the use of NPS, then treat and monitor them;
- co-ordinate and investigate information indicating bullying and intimidation, challenge perpetrators and support victims and take into account the impact on the risk of suicide and self-harm; and
- the Prison Service should put in place an education programme for prisoners outlining the effects and risks of using NPS.

Nigel Newcomen said:

“The use of New Psychoactive Substances is a source of increasing concern, not least in prison. As these substances are not allowed in prison, and also because they are difficult to test for, it is possible that there are additional cases of prisoners who had used such drugs before their death.”

“NPS covers a range of substances and the precise health risks are difficult to establish. However, there is emerging evidence that there are dangers to both physical and mental health, and there may in some cases be links to suicide or self-harm. Staff and other prisoners may be at risk from users reacting violent to the effects of NPS.

“Trading of these substances in prison can also lead to debt, violence and intimidation. Once again, this creates the potential to increase self-harm or suicide among the vulnerable, as well as adding to the security and control problems facing staff. I hope that by sharing the lessons from the few deaths where we know that use of such drugs was a factor, this will further support efforts in prison to address the supply of these substances, respond better to the threats they pose and help educate prisoners so as to reduce demand.”

- ENDS -

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. A copy of the report can be found on the PPO website. Visit www.ppo.gov.uk.
2. The PPO investigates deaths that occur in prison, secure training centres, immigration detention or among the residents of probation approved premises. The PPO also investigates complaints from prisoners, young people in secure training centres, those on probation and those held in immigration removal centres.
3. **Contact us:** Please contact Jane Parsons, PPO Press Office, on 020 3681 2775 or 07880 787452 if you would like more information, or email mail@ppo.gsi.gov.uk.