

## Increased Drug Use Adds Additional Dangers To Gay Lifestyle

By Roy Waller

The recreational use of drugs, especially the highly addictive crystal methamphetamine (also known as "speed"), has reached astronomical proportions in the San Francisco gay community, according to an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

In its feature on the growing problem, the *Chronicle* (5-4-03) cited local health officials who specialize in issues concerning the Bay Area, including Dr. Jeffrey Klausner, director of sexually transmitted disease prevention and control for the San Francisco Department of Public Health. He states that, "We have all sorts of levels of evidence [and] it's all pointing in the same direction: the crystal meth epidemic is playing an important role in increasing sexual risk behaviors, and that is leading to new HIV and STD infections."

According to Dr. Klausner, the use of the widely available and inexpensive drug (\$30 for several days' worth), popular in the gay community for its ability to enhance and prolong sexual activity and temporarily suppress feelings of loneliness and depression, is not only contributing to a major increase in new cases of HIV infection but also an alarming jump in the number of new cases of gonorrhea and syphilis.

Says Klausner, "We have a dual epidemic - a speed epidemic and an HIV epidemic that are both increasing." Even blunter is the statement by Dr. Nora Volkow, the new director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse: "People are using the drug to feel better but they are literally selling their soul to the devil."

Although some might find Dr. Volkow's remarks alarmist or even parochial, experts who have studied the effects of methamphetamine upon the human system have shown

that the use of some two to four grams of the drug per week can result in significant brain damage. Consistent heavy use of the drug has been proven to be equivalent to forty years of normal aging, particularly as it affects memory and motor functioning.

Further, although the drug appears to provide the user a temporary sense of euphoria, its actual effect is to compromise the brain's ability to manufacture dopamine, the naturally produced neurotransmitter responsible for our reception of pleasurable sensations. The inevitable effect of this dual destructive action is that common to all drug addiction: the user's need for larger and more frequent doses.

The effects of crystal methamphetamine use at weekend parties and gay clubs reaches into every area of the user's life, according to Tom Ammiano, the openly gay president of the San Francisco County Board of Supervisors. "Guys start with weekend use and it accelerates," he notes, adding that he is hearing cases of men who cannot properly function on their jobs because of the lingering effects of their weekend drug use.

He also points out that, although the nationwide gay community is attempting to combat the epidemic through education and treatment, there remains a large amount of deliberate ignorance. "There's a tremendous amount of denial around speed use," Ammiano told the *Chronicle*. "It's pernicious. We're also hearing stories of people failing in rehab after eight, nine tries. It's very brutal."

The San Francisco Chronicle article may be read at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2003/05/04/MN281636.DTL&type=health>. ■