

"DOCTOR AT SEA" a monthly Column in The Islander Magazine

Not Drugs and Alcohol Again!!!

Prompting this article was a major row which blew up in the UK recently regarding the relative dangers of cannabis/ecstasy against those of alcohol/smoking.

The Government's chief advisor has been sacked and colleagues on the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs have resigned in protest. The crucial argument is not whether the scientific report just published is flawed (showing that alcohol and smoking do indeed cause more deaths than cannabis) but whether a scientific advisor should enter the political arena by publicly disagreeing with the government's policy.

Cannabis is used at one time or another by about 40% of European young adults and as the scientist pointed out, alcohol can kill in overdose whereas cannabis cannot.

Within the yachting industry, more vessels are now asking for random drugs checks and we, as doctors, have been asked to administer these on board on a number of occasions. Ten drugs, including cannabis can be detected in urine; some up to four weeks after the drug was last taken. Since the result could mean instant dismissal, the specimens are collected fresh, carefully bar-coded, and taken to the laboratory for quantitative analysis should a positive result occur.

Some boats want to keep their chosen crew so let them know well in advance of the planned visit, whereas others want simply to catch the culprits and give no warning at all!

So why do owners and captains bother about a drug which is used by so many people and causes few deaths? Why should you bother? Cannabis can often cause irrational behaviour and poor decision-making, which you don't really need at sea, and there is good evidence that regular use can cause psychosis and personality disorders in some people and subtle brain damage in the long-term! The individual may also be involved in the wider drug scene including the use of cocaine which is one of the most sought after drugs amongst the yachting population.

The speed of the high with cocaine, and the alertness and increased confidence which make it so attractive, also make it more addictive. The rise in temperature and heart rate, and risk of convulsions and sudden death are not enough to put off some users. The slow "come-down" phase can last several days with depression, paranoia, and suicidal thoughts and the desire to take more may be irresistible.

Its use can have other implications and not just for the individual Yachtie. If found on board, it is deemed to be the captain's responsibility and this can lead to imprisonment (even if completely unaware) and impounding or confiscation of the vessel. As you look further, one realizes why most first-world governments have criminalised this drug - cocaine fuels much violent crime, exploits workers in the poor producer countries and leads to the abuse and death of children and women forced to act as "mules" to carry it. Do we really want to support these things by our behaviour and our demand to have a "good time"!

To return to the recent controversy in the UK, what has not yet been emphasised sufficiently is the take-home message; that alcohol and smoking are the real killers.

Here in Palma, asking about alcohol consumption raises a shrug, a grin and the reply "Well, I'm a Yachtie!" This means, not much during the week, and as much as you can get at the weekends!

Binge drinking is the most dangerous sort as the body doesn't have time to adapt and you get drunk more quickly. Even leaving out the frequent reports of Yachties having their drinks spiked prior to robbery from the person; there are every week reports of deaths, head injuries and admissions to hospital as direct results of alcohol. Gangs of money-strapped youths pounce on the Yachtie who is thought to have more than enough for all! In an inebriated state, the Yachtie retaliates, and the rest is history. In the States, some of the most famous regattas report deaths every year due to alcohol-related injury or drowning.

So.....it's the yachting culture, and we can't do much about that, can we? I know plenty of senior crew who use cocaine but never abuse it. We work very hard and are cooped up for long periods. What do you expect when we get to shore, everyone just heads for the nearest bar! If you go to bar, you know you're going to come out legless. Surely, THEY bear some responsibility....are just some of the comments I have heard recently.

The answer, of course, is that you CAN buck the trend. Culture is what you, the Yachtie makes it, and if you make it, you can also change it.

Set yourself limits, space your drinks, and stop before you start down the slippery slope! Watch for spiked drinks and tell your friends if you fear you have been targeted. As for cannabis or cocaine just leave it! Why should YOU risk your job, your career and your life just to be in with the culture?

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