The poor man's cocaine

Metro Council, Legislature consider outlawing Rush use

By ROBERT LONG
Advocate staff writer

It's marketed under the guise of a "room odorizer," but it has a much more common and hazardous use.

It's known as Rush, Thrust, poppers, locker room or poor-man's cocaine. Users of the chemical contained in the substance argue that it's safe to use as an inhalant "because it's legal" and can be readily bought in a number of bars and adult bookstores around Baton Rouge.

But, it may not be legal for long.

A local ordinance that would outlaw possession and use of the chemical contained in the drug was introduced last week before the Metro Council. The state Legislature is considering a bill to outlaw the drug statewide, as 11 states already have done.

Rush, as it is most commonly known, has been around for years, but has been readily available in Baton Rouge for only about a year, said Bunny Purvis, an adviser with the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Program of the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board.

Rush consists of a small bottle containing butyl nitrite or a similar chemical that is inhaled to give a 90-second high. The drug also is popular among homosexuals, said Purvis, who has been researching the chemical since it started popping up in local schools. Rush — which is sold for about $3 to $5 for one-third of an ounce — has been banned from public schools.

"When we see Rush it is almost as an introductory drug," Purvis said, adding that she knows of 10- and 11-year-old students who have used the chemical.

"It is not just your druggy kids using it. Student council members and good kids are using it, too," ADAPP adviser Ann Morgan said.

"High school kids like it because it is so easy to use between highs. They think since it's not illegal, there's nothing wrong with it," Purvis said.

But studies have shown several temporary and permanent side effects from the use of Rush. For instance, many one-time users experience severe headaches, Purvis said.

"They said it's like blowing off the top of your head," Purvis said.

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection did a nine-month study on Rush in 1985, when that state was considering outlawing the chemical.

The use of Rush can cause severe headaches, dizziness, fainting and memory loss, the study said. It also turns blood brown, and restricts the blood cells' ability to carry oxygen to the brain.

Research also is being conducted to determine whether Rush is related to acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), Purvis said.

According to Wisconsin cardiologist Paul Hinderaker, there is evidence that butyl nitrite weakens the body's immune system. While the HTLV III virus is the cause of AIDS, the drug "may play a role as a co-factor in the evolution of AIDS," Hinderaker testified before a Wisconsin Senate Committee.

The Wisconsin study stated that 96 percent or more of homosexual men infected with AIDS had used butyl nitrite, usually heavily. The study also mentioned that three fatalities had occurred when the users drank the chemical.

Often, the manufacturers of the chemicals listed on the bottles are bogus, Purvis said.

The manufacturer on one bottle of Rush — Pacific Western Distributing Corp. in San Francisco, Calif. — could not be found. There is no such telephone listing in San Francisco, and an investigator with the district attorney's office there said investigations in the past have shown that no such company exists.

The label on a bottle of Thrust says that it is distributed by "Doc" Johnson Enterprises, but no address or city is given, Purvis noted.

The directions on the bottle read "remove cap, allow to stand, aroma will develop."

Rush is not regulated by federal drug laws because it is sold as a room odorizer and not as a drug, said Ed Nida, a spokesman for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in Rockfield, Md.

"We have been having a problem with that for about 10 years, but until they make a health claim with the product we can't touch it," Nida said.

Each state has the power to regulate medication, and the states would have to tackle the problem, he said.

State Sen. Mike Cross, D-Baton Rouge, has introduced a bill in the Legislature that would outlaw possession and use of the chemical in Louisiana and would carry a penalty of up to six months in jail and a fine of up to $500.

Rush already has been outlawed in Florida, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Texas, New York, Connecticut, Georgia, Utah, Delaware and Maryland.

The proposed city-parish ordinance, drafted by city police legal adviser Richard Redd, was written at the requests of Purvis and Alcoholic Beverage Control Board Director Marcus Wright.

The ordinance calls for outlawing possession and use of the chemicals contained in substances such as Rush unless a permit is obtained from the chief of police.

The permit part of the ordinance was added because some companies use the chemicals for research or manufacturing, Redd said.

Violators of the local ordinance would face the same penalty as in the proposed state law — up to six months in prison and a fine of up to $500.

Under normal council procedure, the ordinance would go before the Finance and Executive Committee on June 1 and be sent back to the full council for public hearing and vote on June 8.

Drug

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