Illicit Drug Use and Driving by Australian Long Haul Truck Drivers: Reform Starts With Rehabilitation

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Introduction
Long haul truck drivers have historically been a special interest group in the area of drug driving. There is considerable evidence of high rates of both illicit and licit substance use among truck drivers both in Australia and internationally and a general consensus that drug taking for truck drivers is a means of alleviating work related fatigue. Whether or not this is the case, this behaviour has been linked to accident culpability and consequently several legislative measures to combat the problem have been introduced or are under development in Australia and overseas.

Most research on the issue of truck drivers and illicit drug use focuses on accident culpability, drug usage rates and/or fatigue[1]. Very little, if any, research to date allows the drivers to tell their stories, to describe their motives for use and transitions from non-users to users (and possibly addicts). In order to understand the behaviour from the driver’s perspective the current research used qualitative interviews to provide an insight into the lives of these people. Such an understanding of the behaviour is essential if appropriate and successful interventions are to be introduced.

To structure the interviews, Becker’s[2] theory of a ‘career path’ in drug use was used. This theory is used in the research to tease out the complex, overlapping reasons for substance use and continued use for the duration of an individual’s ‘drug use career’. Drivers described their initiation, experiences as a beginner and motivations for continued use over time. Importantly Becker’s[2] theory is structured around the concept of what he called ‘Outsiders’ which in short is a deviant group that is somewhat removed from mainstream society - and the drug using truck drivers interviewed in this current research conveyed this concept regarding their own lives.

Drug use by long haul truck drivers as a work related fatigue countermeasure is well documented and little (if any) research on the matter indicates that truck drivers use illicit stimulant drugs for any other purpose than to stay awake whilst driving for long periods. Mabbott and Hartley[3] reported that drivers indicated that stimulant drug use was a necessary fatigue countermeasure. Indeed, Swann (p.65)[4] stated “Truck drivers use stimulants for occupational reasons and this behaviour is relatively easily changed compared to addictive or recreational drug driving use”.

To date little knowledge from the field and research discipline of substance use has been transposed into the area of drug use by long haul truck drivers. Yet drug driving remains one of the most significant issues associated with long haul driving safety. The current research considers that drug use within this driving population does not happen in isolation from issues of use, misuse and dependence that occur within the general domain of substance use. That is to say, the individuals in this study have characteristics of substance users in general. Many of the biological, psychological and social correlates and risk factors for drug use[5] can be found within such a driving cohort. Furthermore
regardless of work related risk factors, Nicholas and Allsop[6] also suggested that drug use in a workplace may be due to the employment of people who are already high risk for this behaviour. If this is the case, preventing or stopping drug use by truck drivers may not be as simple as altering work conditions.

Method
Thirty five male truck drivers provided data through structured, qualitative interviews for this research. All participants were male and employed as interstate drivers at the time of interviewing. The mean age of drivers was 40 years and the mean duration of truck driving career was 18.69 years. Drivers were paid a $25 interview fee and interviews were approximately 2 hours in duration and included structured, semi-structured and open-ended items which provided both quantitative and qualitative information. Importantly the interviewers were flexible enough to allow issues and themes to be explored as they arose. Along with demographic data, driving history and drug use indicators the interviews collected detailed information about drug driving behaviour and the characteristics of their drug use based on descriptions of actual scenarios. Interviewee’s comments are identified in the text through the use of quotation marks and italics. Participants were recruited through use of advertising on site and in industry publications, connections through known contacts and snowballing techniques. Interviews were undertaken in both major urban metro areas and provincial and regional centres across Queensland. As this was a convenience sample the primary interview selection criteria was that interviewees had to be a current operating driver. Current use of a specific drug was not a selection criteria as those who did not use specific drugs were asked to comment about their past use or others use.

Aim
The aim of this study is to investigate patterns of illicit drug use (licit use was also examined but is not discussed in detail in this paper) by long haul truck drivers in Queensland. Prevalence of this behaviour, types of drugs used and driver’s opinions were investigated. This research also examined the circumstances surrounding the development of a truck driver’s drug using ‘career’[2]. Concepts such as: initiation, usage patterns, changes in motivations and justifications, issues of supply, secrecy and morality and the concepts of a drug using subculture in the road transport industry were investigated.

As mentioned, previous research generally concludes that drug use by truck drivers is a behaviour born of necessity to fight job related fatigue, and therefore should be relatively simple to change compared to drug drivers in wider society who use for recreational reasons or because they are dependent[4]. Based on such studies, it is likely this research will find drug use is motivated by the need for a work related fatigue countermeasure. However it is thought that patterns of recreational and dependent use may become evident due to the social, psychological, biological and work-related risk factors which may exist independently of, or be interrelated to, the justification of use due to fatigue.

Results
Self report licit drug use status. Both licit and illicit drug using behaviours were examined in this research. Almost all drivers interviewed had used licit drugs and almost half currently use on a daily basis. Not surprisingly it was also found that drivers generally believed use of licit stimulants was justified due to the need for anti-fatigue drugs, the legal status of these substances and the (perceived) absence of a negative impact on their driving skill or safety. Although this paper is concerned with illicit use it should be noted
that drivers licit drug uses must be taken into consideration when examining illicit drug use behaviour as the illicits are frequently used in combination with licit substances.

**Self report illicit drug use status.** Twenty respondents had, at some stage, used illicit drugs at work. Of this group, 14 stated they currently use illicit drugs and six were past users. Illicit drug types used are illustrated in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illicit drug type</th>
<th>Ever used</th>
<th>Currently use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Any</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amphetamine (speed)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ephedrine, Duromine, Briquettes or Shakers</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocaine</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marijuana</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Unknown party things”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benzedrine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

**Drug use prevalence and patterns.** The current study found a high level of licit and illicit drug use experience. However, this research used a small sample (35 respondents) and therefore there is no claim of statistical significance of these findings, nor can binding assumptions be drawn regarding the relevance of these drug use rates to the wider, truck driving population.

Substances used were mainly stimulant types, that is: illicit amphetamines and amphetamine based pharmaceuticals (illegally obtained and used). Reasons for drug use were explored in depth - both as self report and peer report data. The current study found that drug use among truck drivers is likely to be a fatigue countermeasure, as well as being a behaviour that incorporates several other motivating factors.

**Drug use as a fatigue countermeasure.** Work related fatigue was strongly linked with both peer report and self report stimulant drug use among this sample. This was an expected finding, particularly due to consistent reporting of this issue in previous studies on truck drivers' drug taking[3].

“To do the long haul…I do it to stay awake”

“…rather than pull up and have six hours sleep…just take a pill…I’m not saying it’s the right thing to do, but it’s better than chewing on a gum tree”

Interestingly whilst use was generally classified as a fatigue countermeasure it was frequently couched during the interviews in terms of drivers’ earnings and profitability.

“In 1984 I used to get $700 to go [from Brisbane] to Sydney. It’s now 2003 and you still get $700 for the same load, same trip…. that’s what causes drug use”
“The job situation must be taken into account…drivers have to work long hours because the rates are too low for them to make a living. The exploitation of subcontractors is rife”

Drug use for reasons other than fatigue. Arguably the most salient findings of the current study relate to illicit drug use by truck drivers for reasons other than fatigue, or at least not solely for anti-fatigue purposes. Past research on the matter has tended not to explore these more complex motives for drug use, nor general risk factors for this behaviour beyond fatigue. Many findings of the current study demonstrate that illicit drug use by truck drivers may be for reasons other than as a fatigue countermeasure. For example, only seven of the 35 respondents reported that illicit drug use among truck drivers was purely a fatigue countermeasure due to the demands of the job.

“I don’t care how they structure the driving hours, the fact is it is still tiring and most of the time you need something to kill that tiredness. It’s very boring too, you see, so that adds to the tiredness. Having said that, you can’t claim that every time a driver takes drugs it’s because he is tired”

The drug use ‘career paths’ of drivers identified in this study revealed distinct patterns with changing (and often co-existing) motivations for individual use at various stages of their lives.

“Started off I never used…got a job then took tablets…now…I’ve never stuck a needle in my arm, but I’ve eaten enough speed to look like Crusty the Clown”

Importantly, it was found that the theme of fatigue was interwoven with other powerful motivations that have seemingly been overlooked in research on this problem. Not surprisingly the current research identified that many characteristics of illicit drug use in the general population are likely to apply to truck drivers as well. Over half of the current users identified in the interviews reported their use was not limited to the workplace. Issues of social use, recreation and relaxation, peer pressure and fitting in with the trucking image were repeatedly mentioned.

“I smoke pot because it relaxes me and helps me wind down after a trip”

“It progressed into being part of my social scene because when you got home you were even more tired that you otherwise would have been, so you take it so you can have some sort of a social life as well”

“Sometimes just because I feel like it….I can’t deny I like it. It makes you feel good”

“Peer group pressure has a lot to do with it….oh well we’d better have a line”…

“You’ve got to remember that truck drivers are a pretty rough bunch of blokes and the type of people that would probably use drugs anyway even if they were doing another job. There’s a fair bit of peer pressure too, especially for the younger blokes to use”
“The best place to hide your feelings is in a bag of drugs, that’s why I used”.

The current research found evidence to support a particularly interesting finding in the literature where a risk factor for drug use in the workplace is employment of individuals who are already using drugs. Such individuals may enter a particular industry finding their drug use behaviour may be accepted, overlooked or encouraged.

“Just did it with a group of mates. Only used recreationally then, but when I started driving trucks I used more often”

“I was already smoking pot and I already used (speed) when I started in the transport industry…kept using… it’s necessary”.

Finally all drivers who reported current or past illicit drug use would at some time in their career fit a clinical definition of dependence. Although a clinical measure such as the DSM was not administered, strong evidence of clinical, personal, social and legal problems indicated in various screening instruments was identified in the interviews. Over one third of all drivers interviewed self reported that they were addicted or had been addicted in the past.

“I can’t do my job without it”

“Started off I needed it to do my job, then I was just an addict”

“Over time it didn’t so much make me feel good as I just felt terrible without it”

Drug addiction is arguably a powerful motivation for repeated drug use and was prevalent within the sample. Based on the data, nearly all of the past and current drug users would have, at some stage exhibited amphetamine dependence syndrome\[6\]. This observation is based on the self-reported frequency of use (e.g. time spent driving whilst on drugs, duration of drug use career and usage rates outside of work) and self reported dependence status. Drug addiction (and specifically amphetamine addiction) is extremely difficult to overcome. It is therefore proposed that for drug addicted drivers, anti-fatigue measures will not impact on drug use.

**Conclusion**

*Implications of this research.* Although this study was small in terms of sample size and demographic area covered, it adds to the developing body of literature on the topic of illicit drug use by truck drivers, furthering some interesting novel findings which may be more thoroughly investigated in larger, future studies.

This study is consistent with previous research in its exposure of the significant problem of illicit drug use in the road transport industry and indeed the existence of a drug using subculture fitting of Becker’s\[2\] description of “Outsiders”. Drug use is common and seemingly disproportionate among this cohort compared to in the wider community. This research also supports previous findings in terms of prevalent drug types, having found the most common substance of abuse is illicit amphetamines.

Previous research has described drug use by truck drivers as a behaviour borne of the need to fight fatigue and has implied that reducing or eliminating work related fatigue is the primary preventative approach that must be taken to impact on drug use\[4\]. Fatigue was
indeed cited as a motivation (and a justification) for drug use by drivers in the current sample. However, the qualitative interviews allowed an in-depth exploration of the drug use careers of these drivers and exposed the existence of different or co-existing motivations for drug use during individual lifetimes. As well as fatigue, these included social motives and peer acceptance, relaxation and to feel good, fitting the ‘trucking image’ and use motivated by addiction.

The most salient implication of this exploratory research is that when addressing this problem, it must be considered that anti-fatigue measures are likely to have reduced effect on truck drivers that are using illicit drugs because of other social, psychological and physical motives. Furthermore there is likely to be a considerable number of drivers using because of these reasons and particularly a growing number continuing to use because of the nature of addiction.

Just as reasons for drug use are complex, multiple, and interrelated, so too are the strategies behind successful interventions. For drug use interventions in the future to be successful in the domain of long haul trucking one has to ask the question: How informed by knowledge of drug use behaviours is the process of policy development and intervention, and is the traditional “reform” response enough by itself, or does drug rehabilitation need to be considered?

References