

P scourge gets close to home

How worried should we be about P? Plenty, going by reports of drug mega-cartels, Oz biker gangs, self-combusting businessmen and erratic driving causing death.

It's got to the stage where a road trip to Auckland to see the grandchildren involves much bigger hazards than Mt Messenger. You don't know when some crazy-eye is going to cross the white line and wipe you out.

I've been trying to put it in perspective. Aside from being a recent addition to the ever-inventive ways humans find to kill each other while making money, methamphetamine (discovered 126 years ago and used in wars to keep people awake) seems to be a step beyond the usual quests for nirvana.

My generation and the ones preceding it had booze. Initially in New Zealand, that was beer and spirits, then wine, and sometimes for the desperate, meth with an "s". Those were legal, if unwise. A beyond-the-rules cohort of that generation and the next several have found what now seems gentle release in the arms of dope-by-many-names.

P compares badly. Have you ever been confronted head-on with its effects? I don't mean via a couple of windscreens, but directly, eye-to-eye, with a person who has over-used.

There lies one of the differences between your "standard" drunk and those infused by meth - the eyes. A drunk's peepers are bleary but seeing, etched in red, rolling about in more extreme cases; the eyes of a meth-head in extremis have nothing.

You can't connect with someone like that. Those firmly gripped in the drug's dreadful vice tend not to see you. They're looking inward at some ghastly nightmare, their pupils having lost the capacity to communicate.

I first saw this in 2006 when running a two-day training seminar on health reporting (the irony) for journalists. One of them, a young woman, started crashing around the hotel late at night, so the hotel manager and I tried to calm her.

We were confronted with something neither of us had seen. This was not a human being in the usual sense. Her eyes were those of a robot, a primitively made one. Somehow we shepherded her back to her room, but an hour later she left again and smashed the plate-glass front door to the hotel.

He called the police and she spent the rest of the night locked up. She returned to the seminar next day in denial. No, she wasn't on drugs, she assured a senior health expert who was due to address the group. He believed her, such was our naivety.

Now, we'd know. Thirteen years later, we'd recognise the signs, know the blank-eyed look, steer clear, hope like hell the affected person wouldn't hit us, or break something...or drive anywhere.

Here's one of the differences, I think (I don't know for sure – the police would, for sure): drunks tend to be out on the road after dark following a buildup of imbibing, whereas you can see the impact of P any time day or night.

He has no proof, but a friend suspects he came across it recently when he tried to get a speeding car to slow down in his street. He saw/heard it approaching at high speed and whipped out his phone so he could mime filming the vehicle.

The car braked violently, u-turned, headed back, mounted the footpath and aimed at my mate, who embraced a concrete power pole.

The young male driver leapt from the battered old heap and charged up to him, stopping centimetres from his face. Abuse followed. A demand for his phone. My mate stood still, denied actually filming, apologised.

The encounter went no further than threats. The driver sped off. It's not certain the young man was meth'd up. But there's the problem - now we can't be sure if that's the case or some young people are just being what they've always been, angry.

My friend was shocked...and feeling lucky. He re-deposited into his mental bank account the thousands of dollars he'd so nearly had to spend on teeth.

This vicious little pantomime played out in a New Plymouth suburb in the middle of one sunny morning. My friend was left wondering whether in fact grim publicity about the scourge of methamphetamine goes far enough.

The long-term effects of every generation's means of mental escape emerge as impacts on health. With boomers, one of those is dementia induced by alcohol. What legacy will P leave?