

Seven high school students in Queensland were taken to hospital last month after [reportedly](#) overdosing on a substance identified as

[Phenibut](#)

. It's an anti-anxiety drug developed for Russian cosmonauts that also has cognitive-enhancing qualities.

According to the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration, Phenibut is a [Schedule 9 prohibited substance](#)

, which means that it cannot be sold legally in this country. Nevertheless, according to [reports](#)

, the students were able to buy the drug online and have it delivered to them on the Gold Coast.

Read more: [*Weekly Dose: phenibut – the Russian anti-anxiety drug linked to Gold Coast teens' overdoses*](#)

This incident reveals the limits of law enforcement practices developed over the 20th century in relation to more traditional drug markets. Current strategies for policing drugs would not have prevented these young people from gaining access to Phenibut.

Why are online drug markets different?

While conventional illicit drug markets have relied on physical exchanges of drugs, the internet has created new opportunities for illicit drug markets to flourish through both the “dark” net and the “surface” net.

“Dark net marketplaces” or [cryptomarkets](#) operate in the hidden portion of the internet. Cryptomarkets are online forums that enable the trade of goods between individuals who use digital encryption to conceal their identities. Although cryptomarkets offer many types of illegal goods and services (and some legal services), the most commonly purchased items are illicit

drugs.

Most illicit drugs sold through cryptomarkets are those taken by recreational drug users (for example, cannabis-related products, stimulants, pharmaceuticals). The heavy presence of recreational drugs is linked to the fact that planning purchases ahead of time and waiting for shipments will not suit individuals who need immediate access to illicit substances, such as dependent drug users.

In contrast to buying Phenibut from the surface net, as the Gold Coast students allegedly did, purchasing from a cryptomarket is a technologically challenging endeavour. These websites are not accessible through familiar search engines; a specialised anonymising browser, the specific URL address of the marketplace, and the possession of cryptocurrency (such as [Bitcoin](#)) are required to perform the transaction.

The term surface web refers to all of the content accessible through popular search engines (such as Google). It contains the sites most people use in their everyday browsing. Drug markets that operate through the surface net often fall into legal grey areas. This is a consequence of significant legislative variation across jurisdictions regarding the production, distribution and possession of some drugs – particularly those that are not specifically identified as illicit in various international conventions and protocols.

The drugs most commonly sold in the surface web drug markets are new psychoactive substances (otherwise known as “research chemicals”, “legal highs” and “bath salts”) and counterfeit versions of prescription-required pharmaceuticals. The surface web drug trade mostly revolves around access to lifestyle drugs such as performance and image-enhancing substances.

This is the context in which people are able to get Phenibut with relative ease. It could be bought through the surface web, using Google to locate a web store willing to ship the product to Australia after an electronic funds transfer.

Even though Phenibut is a scheduled substance in Australia, it is likely that the servers for many of these retail web stores are located in countries where it is entirely legal to manufacture, possess and distribute the drug.

What does this mean for drug control strategies?

Dominant models for controlling illicit drugs mostly work through a combination of prohibition and targeted law enforcement crackdowns on local drug markets. These approaches are grounded in broader criminological understandings that offenders rationally consider the costs and benefits of an act, and that the perceived and actual threat of punishment deters crime. Such models have been [widely criticised](#) for their ineffectiveness and negative health consequences.

Read more: [Small potent doses of illegal drugs are evading authorities but having a huge impact](#)

Admittedly, online drug markets represent only a small portion of the overall global drug trade. Taking into account the ubiquitous nature of the surface web, and the relative ease of acquiring drugs like Phenibut, such markets are likely to grow.

Following the Queensland case, police were quick to [announce](#) a number of seizures of various illicit substances that had been “trafficked” through the domestic mail stream.

Methods for policing online drug markets are relatively new and still being developed. These appear to adopt [similar approaches](#) to those used to address conventional drug markets, even though it is likely that online markets attract different types of customers and operate according to different principles. New strategies are needed that help to reduce harm by better understanding the nature of buyers in these digital domains.

The authors do not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and have disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

Phenibut, online drug markets and the limits of law enforcement

Written by Andrew Childs, Doctoral Candidate, Griffith University

Authors: Andrew Childs, Doctoral Candidate, Griffith University

Read more <http://theconversation.com/phenibut-online-drug-markets-and-the-limits-of-law-enforcement-92581>