

Non-prescribed ketamine use is rising in the UK - including amongst under-16s

Dear Editor,

We strongly agree with Guerrini and colleagues that much more needs to be done in the face of rising non-prescribed ketamine use in the UK. The described barriers to appropriate care are compounded for under-16s, who experience age-related intersectional inequalities of health and healthcare access, within systems designed for adults.

The average age of first ketamine use has previously been reported as 16 or 17 years (e.g. 1). However, our work suggests a downward drift, and this is supported by observations within paediatric services. For example, since January 2025 we have seen a surge in referrals to specialist paediatric urology services in Cheshire and Merseyside for under-16s with ketamine-induced uropathy (KIU).

Data from the 2023/24 Office for Health Improvement and Disparities report into substance misuse in those aged 17 and under showed that amongst those engaging with alcohol and drug treatment in England (n=14,352), 8.4% reported ketamine use, up from 4.5% in 2021/22 (2). These figures, however, represent the very tip of a clinical iceberg as many under-16s will not be accessing services. Other data sources, such as the OxWell Student Survey (3), may be helpful in estimating levels of use amongst school-aged children.

Engagement with under-16s, including those attending what we believe is the first multidisciplinary clinic for children with KIU, suggests that ketamine use is very widespread. It is reportedly so cheap in some parts of the North West of England that it can be bought with pocket money. Prices per gram outside of the North West e.g. Bristol, may be three times as high as, for example, in St Helen's. This may partially explain why cases of KIU in under-16s appear to be focused so far within Cheshire and Merseyside, although other areas are likely to see cases emerge in the near future, based on use amongst those accessing services.

Greater and more meaningful engagement with under-16s is vital to ensure that future work to improve awareness, research, and treatment options includes this often-overlooked group.

#### References:

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2. Office for Health Improvements & Disparities. (England, 2024). Children and young people's substance misuse treatment statistics 2023 to 2024: report. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/substance-misuse-treatment-for-...> (last accessed June 16 2025).
3. University of Oxford. The OxWell Student Survey. Available at: <https://oxwell.org> (last accessed June 16 2025).

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