

To whom it may concern,

I am a gay man – a member of the community most affected by the proposed changes. I have used inhaled nitrites, popularly known as ‘poppers’, on occasion since 2012. The effects of poppers use are extremely short-acting. They play an important role for many gay men in making sexual intercourse less painful, due to their principal effect of relaxing smooth muscle. Indeed, a topical nitrite product, glyceryl trinitrate, is available for the same purpose as a pharmacist-only medication.

Poppers have been used by gay men for sexual purposes since the 1970s. The medical literature shows a smattering of case reports documenting injuries attributed to poppers use. Only recently have there been very few reports of retinal injuries subsequent to poppers use in specific circumstances (where products are old or perhaps involve recently reformulated products). This trend needs to be understood in a regulatory context.

In the United Kingdom, the Conservative Party MP Crispin Blunt spoke publicly about the benefits that nitrite inhalants offer gay men, during debate over legislation to ban legal highs. A Home Affairs Select Committee report found the use of poppers was ‘not seen to be capable of having harmful effects sufficient to constitute a societal problem.’[\[i\]](#)

In the EU in 2007 and in Canada in 2013, regulatory action was taken to ban the sale of the chemical formulations commonly included in poppers products. This in turn caused some manufacturers to include different formulations in poppers products. Users have reported the reformulated products often cause an intense headache, ‘blue lips’ and a characteristic chesty cough in the days after use. *The Lancet* attributes ‘poppers maculopathy’ to the reformulated product.[\[ii\]](#)

This highlights the risk of product substitution posed by any ban. Following the EU and Canadian regulatory action, alternative products have been brought to market. These are packaged in aerosol cans. These are not nitrite inhalants and their mechanism is effectively the same as paint-sniffing. These products would not be captured by the proposed ban, and indeed the proposed ban is highly likely to increase the market for such products.

Poppers have been in use for nearly five decades with very few reports of serious harm, and recent case reports describe a previously undocumented form of harm. This suggests the harm is the result of the reformulated products, which were only adopted due to regulatory action. Banning nitrite inhalants *as a class* will have a significant impact on the capability of many gay men to achieve sexual pleasure and intimacy without pain and discomfort. In addition, it will expose a historically marginalised, stigmatised and criminalised community to a new vulnerability to criminal prosecution.

A more targeted ban, leaving long-standing formulations legal, would reduce the risks of rare but serious clinical harms, and prevent the import and widespread uptake of copycat products whose risks are substantially unknown.

Yours sincerely,

