

# Walking on thin ice

Methamphetamine is rife in Hong Kong. Drug busts are at a record high and addiction is rampant. Arthur Tam investigates the root of this pervasive problem. Additional reporting by Anna Cummins

Crystal meth is an insidious drug. Ketamine is nothing compared to meth.” Author Paul Schulte is a part-time addictions counsellor at the Hong Kong Sanatorium and Hospital as well as other medical facilities across the city. And he’s one of the frontline witnesses to Hong Kong’s rapidly escalating problem with meth, a dangerously addictive yet easy to produce stimulant. “Crystal meth has an extremely expensive social and economic cost to society,” he continues. “The government should forget about ketamine and focus on meth.”

Crystal methamphetamine, often known as ‘ice’ in reference to its white, crystalline appearance, seems to be everywhere right now. The Customs and Excise Department, together with the Police Force, dealt with 1,013 meth-related cases in 2014 – that’s almost three per day. Meth arrests are now only second to ketamine. Last December, customs officers made their largest seizures of the drugs at Chek Lap Kok airport, uncovering 104kg of meth worth \$42million on its way to Malaysia. Some 611kg of meth was seized in Hong Kong last year, a three-fold increase from 2013. In the first four months of this year there were more police cases related to meth in the city than any other drug.

“It’s very easy to get ice in Hong Kong. I can be smoking in five minutes if I want,” one recovering addict, who asks to be referred to as D, tells us. “It’s so easy. I don’t think the government is aware of the problem because there are dealers everywhere. Everyone has two or three dealers.” D has been clean for the past month and is currently going through rehab. He’s been living in Hong Kong for the past six months and was previously working in Shanghai. “When I relocated to here, I thought Hong Kong would be the solution,” he says. “But I found out that the meth scene here isn’t on the same level. It’s even worse.”

It’s relatively easy to find meth in Hong Kong these days with the convenience of home delivery systems. That’s according to H, another recovering addict. “[The meth] would get delivered to my place by a lady and her three-year-old daughter. Her baby daughter gave me a bag of McDonald’s with the ice inside the burger. They were very paranoid that they might get caught. Sometimes we would go to 7-Eleven and her boyfriend would be there pouring hot water into a cup of noodles and he would give me an Octopus card with ice under it. It was madness.” H pauses. “I really thought my dealer was a close friend of mine,” he adds, shaking his head. “We’d talk about our lives and everything. I was wrong.”

H, who has just passed his 34th birthday, sunk deep into meth addiction after he broke up with his partner three years ago. Already prone to spells of alcoholism, H began to take ice every single day until he overdosed on April 7, 2015. “I was plopped on the floor in my own blood and pee until a friend found me and called 999. I was led out of my home handcuffed to a stretcher,” he recalls. “I had taken meth, metal cleaner and GHB [an anaesthetic often used as an illegal intoxicant]. It’s lucky I didn’t die. The overdose gave me a chance to address my addiction, so I’m really, really grateful for that.”

The upsurge in demand is, of course, linked tightly to supply. Much of the meth taken in Hong Kong is suspected of trickling down from the Mainland, which according to Schulte has now surpassed Mexico as the number one producer of methamphetamines. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime reports that, out of the 326 drug labs raided by Chinese authorities in 2012, 228 were making methamphetamine. In January 2014, 2.9 tonnes of meth was seized from a secret lab in Lufeng, Guangdong province (200km northeast from the Hong Kong border). And so far this year

another 2.4 tonnes have been seized in the same city. It is estimated that about one third of China’s meth production comes from this region. Many of the precursor chemicals needed to make meth, such as the decongestant pseudoephedrine or methylamine are increasingly regulated in places like the US, Europe and parts of Asia. There are, however, still limited regulations when it comes to China, making it a perfect hotbed for the large-scale production of meth in factories. Last year it was reported by local media that two notorious Hong Kong triad groups, the 14k and Sun Yee On, had allied with the Sinaloa Cartel – one of the most infamous Mexican drug gangs – to supply these precursor chemicals to the country, thereby fuelling the global meth industry.

A 35-page study released by the UN this May identifies Hong Kong and the Mainland as key players in a growing trade of illegal narcotics throughout the region. The report also shows that seizures of crystal meth across Asia have exploded fourfold from 11 tonnes in 2008, to 42 tonnes in 2013.

Hong Kong has a serious meth problem, and most academics and rehabilitation experts concur that it is heavily underreported. “The government wants to claim they have a victory, so they come up with the numbers to show that,” says Dave McGuire, a clinical supervisor at The Cabin – an addiction treatment and rehab centre that opened earlier this year in Central. It’s interesting to note that the Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA) reports an overall drop of drug usage in Hong Kong over recent years. The narcotics division of the security bureau reports a humble year-on-year decline in arrests for ‘drug offences related to ▶



# BREAKING IT DOWN

Meth is cheap, readily available and gives a high like no other

# \$430



The retail price of methamphetamine in Hong Kong is around this much per gram

# 23,959

suspects were arrested in 10 cities across Guangdong and Shandong provinces during an anti-meth operation in November 2014. Over 12.1 tonnes of drugs were seized and 100,000 users investigated

# 43%

of people think that drug abuse is a serious problem in Hong Kong, according to an HKU survey from 2014

# 8,926

The 'official' number of drug abusers in Hong Kong

# 1,500%

The increase in seizure of meth pills across mainland China between 2008 (six million) and 2012 (100 million)

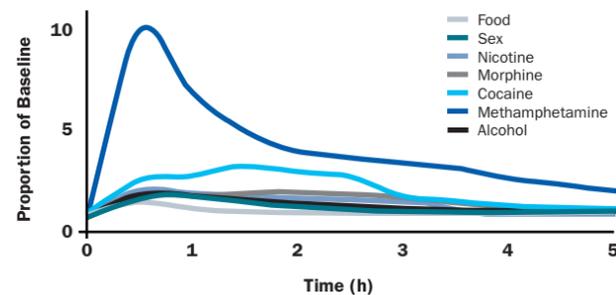
# 2

types of meth are most commonly found across Asia. Yaba tablets and crystal meth

# 1,910

meth abusers were reported across the city in 2014. That's up from 1,639 in 2012. However the real figure is likely to be much higher

## Dopamine release: Methamphetamine



# 8-12 hours

The amount of time a user will be in an altered state after taking meth



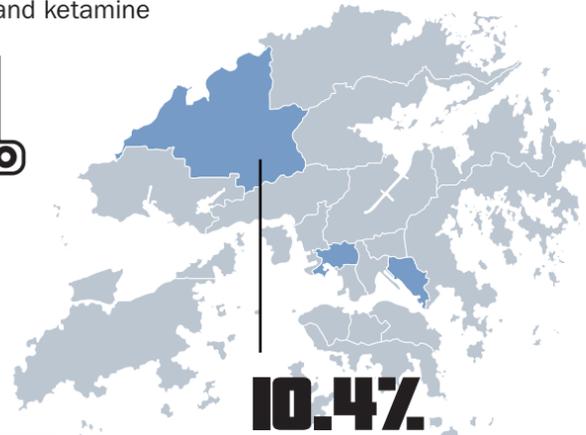
# 186%

HK customs officers report that the year-on-year drug seizures in the first half of this year have risen by this much. Most of those are meth and ketamine

# 7 years



The maximum jail sentence in Hong Kong for dangerous drug possession or consumption. Those caught with drugs can also be subject to a \$1million fine.



# 10.4%

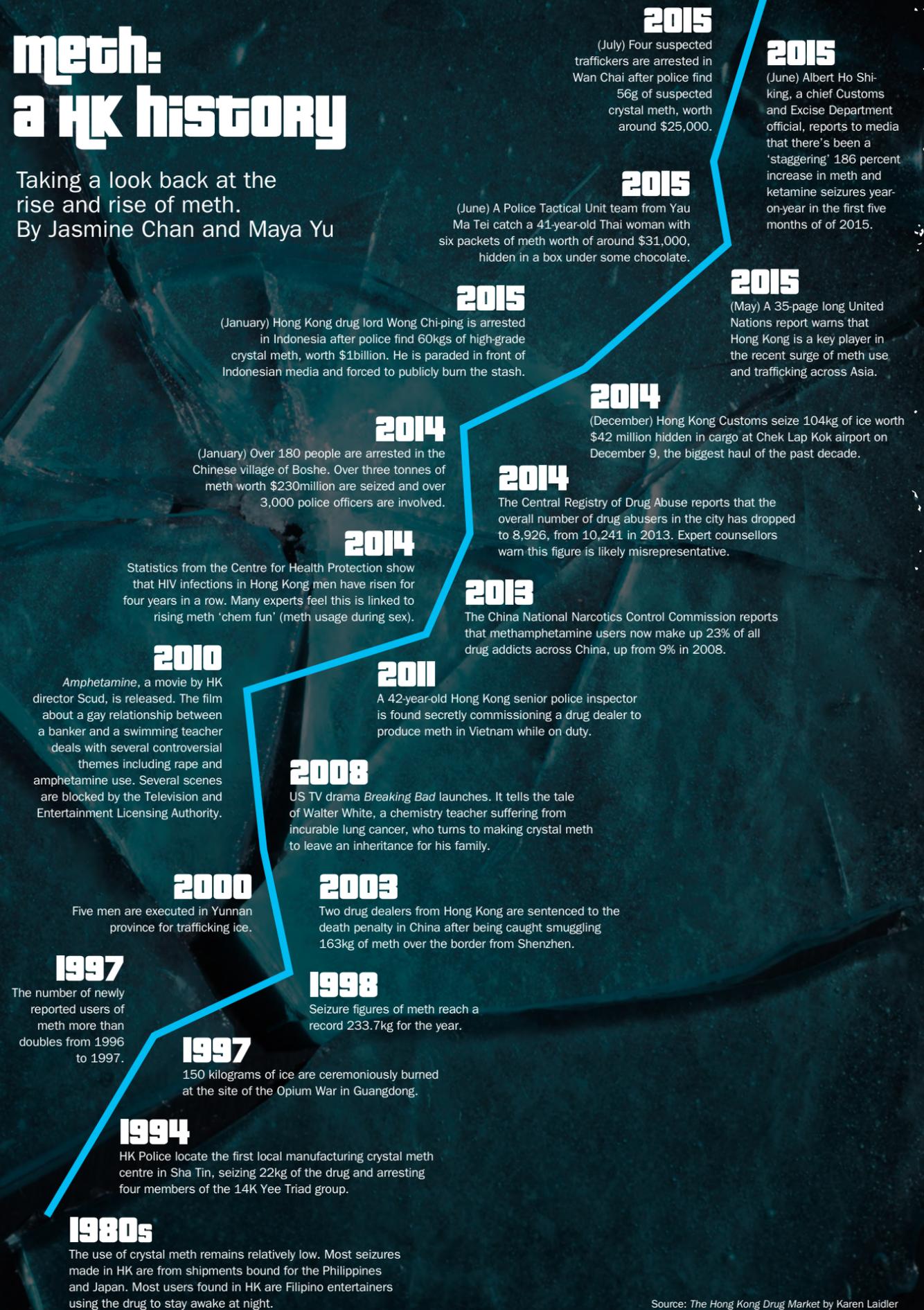
Of meth users reported in 2014 lived in Yuen Long. It is the district with the most meth abuse, followed by Sham Shui Po (9.6%) and Kwun Tong (9.4%)

# 42 tonnes

of meth was seized across Asia in 2013. That's up almost fourfold from 2008, when 11 tonnes was seized

# meth: a HK history

Taking a look back at the rise and rise of meth.  
By Jasmine Chan and Maya Yu



Source: *The Hong Kong Drug Market* by Karen Laidler



Haul in A meth raid from Macau

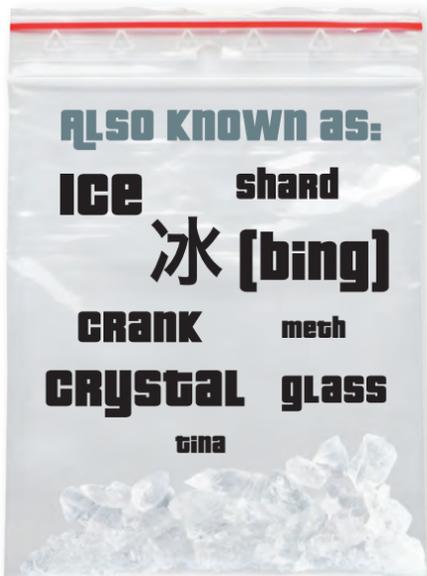
methamphetamines', from 1,391 arrests in 2013 to 1,377 in 2014.

"The numbers in these reports are probably generated from mandated drug users and they make up, at best, one percent of the actual addicted population. That's a slim sample size and you're dealing with addicts, who are not known to be accurate reporters about their own drug use," continues McGuire. "There are probably some politicians benefitting from these numbers."

"[The official figures] just don't seem to add up to what our clients are saying," says Joanne Schmitt, head counsellor at The Cabin. "I question what the methodology is behind those reports and whether [the data] is statistically significant."

"This official data represents a partial picture of the drug market. The actual extent of use is unknown as users do not necessarily come in to contact with reporting agencies," says Professor Karen Joe Laidler, director of the Centre of Criminology at The University of Hong Kong. "If you account for 'hidden use' the actual number could be much higher."

Ice is the purest and most addictive form of methamphetamine. It's highly sought after for its addictive stimulant properties, which cause a huge rush of the 'pleasure chemical' dopamine into the brain. Ice releases three times more dopamine



than cocaine and the effects can last from eight to 12 hours, compared to around two hours for cocaine. Crystal meth can either be snorted, smoked, mixed with soda or juice to be drunk, swallowed in pill form or, for the quickest effect, injected. "Most users that I've observed in Hong Kong smoke it, while 25 percent inject it," says D.

On top of its extreme effects, meth is relatively inexpensive, making it even more accessible to the public – especially for younger users. "The fastest growing population of meth users are young people," says Prof Laidler. The market price for meth is a mere \$430 per gram, which can last for two to three weeks. Cocaine costs \$1,200 per gram, and that may only last for a few nights."

"The cost of meth definitely makes it more desirable, but so does its availability," says Dr Sky Lau of the Department of Sociology at HKU, who has researched the effects of drugs, including meth, on the local gay community. "The quality of ketamine and ecstasy has dropped in recent years, so in its place comes meth, which gives the user an incredible high. And the users getting into meth are getting younger and younger. The youngest I've come across is 17 years old."

Unsurprisingly, the incredible high is followed by a disastrous down. This is one of several reasons that methamphetamines are classified as a dangerous Class A drug in Hong Kong. "After a high comes a 'crash', where the user experiences a physical and mental breakdown," explains psychiatrist Dr Vanessa Wong, who has a decade of experience in the field. "The addict can sleep for several days, neglect to eat, drink or go to the bathroom. Over time this can lead to severe depression. Chronic abuse produces psychosis similar to the effects of schizophrenia, where the user suffers from hallucinations, causing picking of one's skin until there are sores. The person becomes irrational, self-absorbed, agitated, and this can cause an obsessive grinding of the teeth ('meth mouth')." Long term physical effects include permanent damage to the heart, brain, liver, kidney and lungs, which increases the chance of heart attacks, strokes and, in some rare cases, causes Parkinson's disease. The drug also has an infamous link to sex, as it causes a decrease in a user's inhibition. This is also, however, linked to the contraction of HIV, hepatitis and many other STDs. (See more on 'sex and meth' on p28).

"Meth is the most evil thing in the world," declares H. "Once the disease has seeped in, there is no control. People are powerless. But we have control over our recovery, it's up to us to stick with it and push on. One of the most difficult things is the stigma addicts have to deal with. Addiction is an illness that if left untreated will get worse." Schulte agrees, "Addiction is seen as a moral failing in Hong Kong because of Chinese culture. It has to be treated as a disease. Punishing addicts and putting them in jail is a terrible idea. Hardcore traffickers need to go jail, not addicts. Jails are expensive and inmate costs are high. A very successful programme in America is called Court Diversion. You ask an offender, 'do you want to go to jail for six months or go to 12-step meeting?'"

So-called 12-step meetings are offered at The Cabin in combination with cognitive behavioural therapy. For severe cases, an inpatient programme, where addicts are sent to a facility where they can completely detox while airing out wounds with other recovering addicts. This is where H has opted for treatment. There are also some government-subsidised facilities, such as the Sane Centre in Tsuen Wan, which provides treatment and therapy. "Drug addiction is a disease that's prevalent but is being kept in the dark and shamed," says Schmitt. "Getting that

## the BREAKING Bad effect

The popular US crime drama brought meth into the consciousness of millions

*Breaking Bad*, the TV show that tells the story of a US high school chemistry teacher who turns to making meth when he finds out he has lung cancer, is a modern phenomenon. Running over five seasons between 2008 and 2013, it garnered widespread acclaim and millions of viewers. The distinctive 'pure' blue colour of the meth made by protagonist Walter White has become near-synonymous with crystal meth now, despite the fact that the drug is usually a shade of white.

The writers have admitted that the science behind the formula used for making meth on the show was purposefully slightly incorrect, with the hope of dissuading people from making it themselves. Regardless, there are many who worry that giving meth the 'Hollywood treatment' has had a negative influence. *Breaking Bad*-themed parties, with meth-themed candy and cakes, became a popular trend while the show was at its most popular. The state of Albuquerque in New Mexico became a tourist hotspot: blue-meth candy and doughnuts, locally brewed Heisenberg 'dark' beer, segway tours as well as Pez dispensers in the shape of the cast have all cropped up.

The show coincidentally timed perfectly with the huge global upswing in meth production and trafficking. Since 2008, copycat drug producers in the US have reportedly been adding blue chemicals to their meth in the hope of persuading their consumers it is purer, like the substance in the show, and then selling it for up to 50 percent more than white meth.

However, it's not all bad. One rehab clinic in Albuquerque, where the show was set, gave away a series of 'Breaking Addiction' scholarships to addicts to help them get clean.

message out to addicts as well as family members themselves is important."

If there's one thing that everyone agrees on, it's that urgent action is needed to curb the astronomical rise of meth usage and trafficking going on in Hong Kong. "We have to educate the public and the government and understand that the penal system is not going to work to help drug addicts," says Schulte. "We need aggressive campaigning, accessible and affordable treatment and a free, clean needle exchange programme to curb the rise of HIV. Right now we have none of that. We are at ground zero." ■

Find out more about HK's drug policies and treatment centres on the Narcotics Division's website, [nd.gov.hk](http://nd.gov.hk)

## In their words

Ex-addicts tell us about their journey from addiction to recovery

"The first time I had contact with ice, I already had other drug habits"

"I became broke so I started selling to my closest friends"

"I would hallucinate and see 'them' out the window of my flat. I wanted to open the window to get to 'them'"

"I felt I was lower than a street rat"

"I always thought someone was after me, so I carried a long knife in my bag"

"Oh my god, I poured toilet cleaner down my throat"

"I felt that my arms had insects inside"

"For many addicts, the mind and the heart become disconnected"

"I will be a recovering addict for my whole life"

"Recovery is learning a new way to love, learning not to hurt the ones we love"

## need help? seek it here

Two local rehab centres tell us about their services

### Nurse Cheng from Sane Rehab Centre

#### How does Sane Centre deal with addiction?

We do it in three ways. Firstly, we offer casework counselling services, small group treatments in combination with psychiatric nurses working to address the mental health problems that come with ice addiction. Secondly, we monitor recovering addicts at different junctures to make sure they are leading a healthy life. Lastly, we carry out preventive education. So we are in contact with people who are in contact with drugs, but also those who have not yet come in to contact with drugs. *Sane Centre, Units 03-04, 16/F, 99 Tai Ho Rd, Tsuen Wan, 2402 1010; [sanecentre.net](http://sanecentre.net).*

### Dave McGuire and Joanne Schmitt of The Cabin

#### What services are offered at The Cabin?

S: We begin by assessing each individual. Each person is evaluated based on their drug of choice based on their length of use and what physical state they are in.

M: What we use here as part of our treatment model is psycho education – addicts have to know what they're really doing to themselves and why. We also use cognitive behavioural therapy which is really hands on. We call addicts out on their problems and denial in a non-judgemental and loving way. Our first priority is making sure clients are physically safe.

#### Can you explain the difference between inpatient and outpatient care?

S: Inpatient care is when a client goes to our facility in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Someone will go and stay there for approximately a month and be immersed in the recovery and join other recovering addicts. We take away the ability to get drugs and give someone a month or several months of clarity, by providing structure to their lives. The experience gives structure back to people. With outpatient care it's more for people who still have stability and structure and come to our office in the evenings to have sessions with us. *The Cabin Unit C, 12/F, On Hing Bldg, 1-9 On Hing Terrace, Central, 3008 5841; [thecabinhongkong.com.hk](http://thecabinhongkong.com.hk).*

# meet the experts

Two people with first-hand experience of ice reveal the popular misconceptions surrounding the prevalent drug

## Chris Thrall

A former Royal Marine Commando and recovered crystal meth addict who fell into dependency in Hong Kong, where he worked as a doorman for the triad organisation 14K. His book about these experiences, *Eating Smoke*, is currently being made into a radio show by RTHK

### What was life like as a meth addict in Hong Kong?

I needed a minimum of two smokes every day to feel normal. I would stay awake for nine days at a time. When you get to that point, your brain gets so overloaded with chemicals and you're so sleep-deprived that you develop psychosis. When you're addicted to something, it becomes the most important thing in your life.

### What triggered the realisation that you needed help?

One day I was about to head for the shops when I suddenly realised I was too ashamed to go outside of my house. I thought if someone talked to me I wouldn't know what to say. All I knew about was my drug and me. It suddenly hit me: 'Oh my God Chris, what have you done?' I used to be a Royal Marine, I used to have a business in Hong Kong. At that point I had nothing. I woke up that day and I couldn't stop crying. I made

a promise to myself to do fewer drugs. I got my mind back. I started to be able to plan things. I could get a job. My family started to understand me again. Now, I can have a drink or cigarette – it's my choice now.

### How do you think the problem of meth addiction can best be addressed?

The problem is that there are some people like me who are predisposed to addiction. If you're going to have a problem with crystal meth, you're probably going to have a problem with alcohol or something else. Society needs to understand that addiction is a mental health illness. You shouldn't make someone a criminal because they have a mental health illness. You can't put a stop to it by passing laws. What you can do is make young people aware of the dangers of addiction and educate people about drug use so that when they find themselves in that terrible place, they understand what's happening to them.

### Having come out of that terrible place, who do you think are the most vulnerable to fall into meth addiction?

People who have been damaged as children. My parents weren't happy together, there was violence. Anyone with a damaged upbringing, they will be vulnerable to any type of addiction, not just to crystal meth. *Rhoda Kwan*



## I suddenly realised I was too ashamed to go outside of my house



## People think all meth users are skinny with bad sores on their arms, with no teeth

## Dr Vanessa Wong

A psychiatrist who has worked with substance abusers for a decade tells us three things people still commonly get wrong about meth addiction

### You can easily identify a meth addict by his or her appearance.

False. "People think all meth users are skinny due to loss of appetite or physical exhaustion with bad sores on their arms and no teeth aka 'meth mouth'. The truth is, it can be difficult to tell who is using or who has used it."

### Using meth once results in addiction.

False. "Research by Dr Carl Hart, associate professor of psychology and psychiatry at Columbia University, and author of the book *High Price* shows that 80 to 90 percent of people who use crack and methamphetamine don't get addicted. And the small number who do become addicted are nothing like the popular caricatures. It is true that meth is powerfully reinforcing and that people generally report positive effects on their

first use. However, as with all substances, dependence develops with repeated use. This myth may send the wrong message, especially to younger users, because if people are able to use methamphetamine once and then not use it again for a long period of time, they may feel they can use it again and not become dependent. They also think that, since this message about addiction was not true, none of the messages about the dangers of methamphetamine should be believed.

### Meth causes holes in the brain.

Kind of false. "It is true that meth changes the way the brain functions. The idea that meth causes actual holes in the brain results from a misunderstanding of the images that are created using complex scanning machines. Functional MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) scans showing brain activity depict areas of low or no activity as holes. These scans depict functional changes, not the actual structure of the brain. In other words, the apparent 'holes' in the image indicate areas in the brain that are inactive, not holes in the structure of the brain. *Maya Yu*

# SEX and meth

Meth is slamming Hong Kong. Ice and sex go hand in hand, and so-called 'chem fun' is rife among the gay male community. Arthur Tam finds out why

'Crystal meth is for pure sex', says Paul Schulte, a local drug counsellor and author of the recent book, *Paths to Recovery for Gay and Bisexual Drug Addicts: Healing Worn Hearts*. "Everything looks good when you're on meth and you look good to someone on it."

Sex and drugs may have gone hand in hand since the birth of rock 'n' roll, but there isn't much that's sexy or glamorous about meth. In fact, rather than the perceived glitz associated with certain narcotics, the common stereotype of a meth addict is someone unkempt, gaunt and covered in sores. But that hasn't stopped it being associated with sex. And it's disproportionately used during sex by gay men, often during group sessions known as slamming parties. The act of sex on meth, whether in a pair or a group, is known as 'chem fun' – chemical fun.

"Straight men and woman obviously take meth as well for sex, but I do believe gay men take it to another level," says Dr Sky Lau, who spent three years researching his 2014 PhD thesis *Experiencing Risky Pleasure: The Exploration of 'Chem Fun' in the Hong Kong Gay Community*. "I would say that gay men tend to take meth in groups more than straight individuals." Indeed, a glance through profiles on Grindr and Jack'd (gay social apps) these days reveals it's not uncommon to see guys writing that they want 'chem fun' or 'high fun', or otherwise simply indicating it with a pill emoticon. "I would say that 70 percent of the guys on Grindr are looking for chem fun," says D, a recovering meth addict and gay man.

But why are so many gay guys, in particular, turning to meth? "The gay community is a stigmatised community," says Schulte. "Many in the LGBTI community can say they've been beaten, bullied, kicked out of their families, churches and communities. If they aren't out, they're closeted to their parents and full of shame with low self-esteem. Crystal meth comes along and it is an excellent drug to make all those issues go away."

Dave McGuire, clinical supervisor at The Cabin rehab facility in Central agrees. "In the gay population, there is so much more stress and that creates an environment for flourishing addicts. I wouldn't say that addiction is created by environment, although it's definitely a factor."

According to a survey conducted by the Butler Center for Research in the US in 2013, 48 percent of individuals in the LGBTI community versus 15 percent of heterosexuals have suffered sexual abuse and 51 percent versus 28 percent had suffered physical abuse. Dependence on alcohol and one other illicit drug is 43 percent versus 29 percent.

Lau also believes that, although meth is mostly used to initiate sex, it also serves as a very important tool for socialising. "This subculture is not all about a perceived seediness. I don't deny that health risks and addiction are part of this group activity, but there is wider context where gay men can have a comfortable space to socialise and make friends, free of judgement. Some men have even found their boyfriends through chem fun."

D agrees with Lau to ascertain extent. With few options and activities for gay men to socialise, he turned to Grindr to find friends. "I think that Shanghai and Hong Kong are

both very difficult places to get along with people," he muses. "I went to a sex party that I found on Grindr and someone gave me ice. That was my first contact." But for D, it wasn't a comfortable space. "You keep saying the same thing over and over again, when you're on ice, you go in circles and nothing you say makes sense in the real world. You try to solve things on ice and but it's so dangerous because you can fuck up. You can't put logic together. You crash and you disappear for two days and that hurts your relationship with work, family and friends."

Disappearing for a couple of days is not the most severe danger associated with meth, however. "Most don't use condoms during chem fun," says D, pointing out the sheer lack of inhibition caused by a meth high. It's certainly a worrying fact that the number of recorded cases of HIV in Hong Kong has risen steadily in the past four years. Men make up 145 of the 173 cases reported in the first half of 2015, and just over half of these cases involved MSMs (Men who have Sex with Men). The youngest case involved a boy who was 17 years old.

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## Ice is an absolute gateway to HIV

A study from an Aids Concern, a longstanding local NGO, recently published a study showing that 41 percent of gay men in the city did not use a condom for every sexual encounter. "Ice is an absolute gateway to HIV," says Schulte. "It's 12 to 18 months from ice to HIV". And it's not just HIV that's a concern. During chem fun, users often combine ice with

other drugs to get that perfect high. A commonly taken side drug is the anaesthetic GHB, often known as 'g' or 'water'. Because it's difficult to get an erection on meth, users also frequently combine the meth hit with Viagra. This drug cocktail, ultimately, wreaks havoc on the body.

"In the moment it feels so good," says 23-year-old N. "I first tried chem fun when I was 19 and I was just curious. I felt like I was melting into the bed. I just wanted to go on forever. But after the effects wore off, I felt horrible – it's the worst thing ever. I tried for the second time, but without a condom. I felt more reckless, but I realised how risky it was afterwards. I haven't tried it since." N however, admits that he doesn't regret the experience. "I'd rather know what it's like," he adds.

Not everyone that takes meth is an addict. In fact, according to psychiatrist Vanessa Wong, '80 to 90 percent of people who use either crack or methamphetamine don't get addicted.' Even so, for the 10 percent who do, it can be extremely difficult to beat the addiction, even with the best care.

HIV is by no means specifically an issue solely impacting the gay community. But it is, sadly, now an increasing concern, and it's hard to deny that meth use is playing a big part in that fact. Recent figures indicate that rates of HIV infection in the city are the highest they have been in the last 30 years.

"Look, I'm gay," says Schulte. "The community has come so far but it still faces stigmatisation. There's a problem, and the gay community has to take responsibility for it."

Read Lau's thesis at [hub.hku.hk](http://hub.hku.hk), and find out more about Aids Concern at [aidsconcern.org.hk](http://aidsconcern.org.hk)