

# **Drug and Alcohol Monitoring and Information System (DAMIS)**

## **Summary report**

October 2019 – March 2020

### **Background**

DAMIS is an “early warning system” designed to find out about emerging trends in drug and alcohol misuse, so we can act quickly and provide relevant information or advice to those who misuse drugs or alcohol. Much of the information sent out through DAMIS is practical advice aimed at reducing the harms to people from their drug use. It is aimed at adults, and those working with young people should exercise their professional judgement to ensure that any information passed on to people under 18 is appropriate.

The kind of information DAMIS collects includes:

1. A sudden increase in a particular drug being misused
2. Drugs being misused in new ways
3. New drugs becoming available
4. Emergence of substances with unexpected unpleasant or dangerous effects

The Department of Health oversees DAMIS with support from lead partners: the Public Health Agency (PHA), the Department of Justice (DOJ), the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and Forensic Service Northern Ireland (FSNI).

Representatives of these agencies form the DAMIS Steering Group.

DAMIS is essentially an e-mail network of individuals who work for specialist drug and alcohol services, or for services that work with or treat people who misuse drugs or alcohol (for example homeless services, or Emergency Departments (ED's)). These people have access to information on emerging drugs and their impact on people who use them, and are ideally placed to pass on timely information to DAMIS. Their roles also give them the opportunity to provide timely harm reduction information to their clients.

Those on the DAMIS Network email information they have on substances of concern to a central email address. The information contained in these emails is shared with the DAMIS Steering Group for consideration. However, DAMIS is a confidential system and the identity of anyone who sends in emails is seen only by the PHA coordinators.

People who wish to be added to the DAMIS Network can contact the PHA coordinator to request an application form which they can complete, indicating their role in provision of drug and alcohol, and/or other related services.

As at March 2020, there were 406 individuals on the DAMIS network.

The following tables summarise key information received by DAMIS, and circulated by DAMIS, in the 6 months from October 2019 – March 2020.

### Information received by DAMIS during October 2019 – March 2020

| Emails received by DAMIS October 2019 – March 2020 |   |
|--|---|
| Date   | Topic   |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> October 2019                       | <p>White heroin</p> <p>Information received that a new type of heroin called 'white heroin' has arrived in Ballymena. It is very strong and has caused long term heroin users to blackout which is unusual. It can be bought easily online and there are concerns that this strain of heroin can kill people.</p> <p><i>Action: No further information was provided by partners to corroborate or dispute this</i></p>  |
| 23 <sup>rd</sup> October 2019                      | <p>Fake MSJ Diazepam</p> <p>A staff member within a Coleraine hostel has reported the presence of fake Diazepam (5mgs) in the Coleraine and Portrush area</p> <p>These tablets are now being produced and sold as yellow Diazepam rather than blue with the letters MSJ on the front of them, unlike the prescribed Diazepam. These tablets are causing people to black out and lose consciousness if staff can be aware</p> <p><i>Action: A DAMIS alert was issued on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019</i></p> |
| 28 <sup>th</sup> October 2019                      | <p>HSE drug testing plans fail to get Garda green light</p> <p>A link was forwarded from Rol colleagues, regarding the HSE drug testing plans</p> <p><a href="#">Irish Examiner - HSE Drug testing plans fail to get Garda green light</a></p> <p><i>Action: Email sent onto DAMIS Steering group for information</i></p>   |
| 28 <sup>th</sup> October 2019                      | <p>Information received in response to DAMIS alert - potential fake Diazepam (5mgs)</p> <p>Since the white rectangular XANAX bars became prevalent, the illicit 'MSJ' tablets (diazepam) have become less common recently. The 'MSJ' tabs have always been available in both blue and yellow, blue being the most prevalent. The yellow tabs were mostly submitted in 2017-2018.</p> <p><i>Action: None required, additional information received in response to request</i></p>                            |
| 12 <sup>th</sup> November 2019                     | <p>Drug related deaths</p> <p>Reports of a number of possibly drug related deaths in the Ards /</p>   |

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
|                                | <p>Comber area. From initial reports, it is believed that the individuals may have taken heroin and, in some circumstances, along with fentanyl.</p> <p>Further information received that there have been at least three suspected heroin related deaths in the past week.</p> <p><i>Action: DAMIS alert issued 14<sup>th</sup> November 2019</i></p>  |
| 14 <sup>th</sup> November 2019 | <p>Heroin related deaths in Ballymena</p> <p>Information received that within the first two week in November there were three drug related deaths in Ballymena, with suspected polydrug use, including heroin, awaiting toxicology to confirm</p> <p><i>Action: DAMIS alert issued 14<sup>th</sup> November 2019</i></p>   |
| 18 <sup>th</sup> November 2019 | <p>Drug related deaths in the greater Belfast area</p> <p>Information received regarding a number of deaths which have occurred in the Greater Belfast area linked to heroin use and polydrug use</p> <p><i>Action: DAMIS alert issued 19<sup>th</sup> November 2019</i></p>   |
| 26 <sup>th</sup> November 2019 | <p>Heroin in Belfast</p> <p>Information received from service user regarding heroin which is extremely light in colour and cooks up very quickly and looks clear.</p> <p><i>Action: No further information was provided by partners to corroborate or dispute this</i></p>   |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> December 2019  | <p>Drug death in Belfast</p> <p>Information received about a drug related death in North Belfast, with another person seriously ill in hospital. Pregabalin was found at the scene but no information yet as possible cause</p> <p>Further information provided that the individual was suspected of taking methadone and 'blues' the previous night</p> <p><i>Action: DAMIS alert issued 5<sup>th</sup> December 2019</i></p> |
| 18 <sup>th</sup> December 2019 | <p>Suspected drug overdoses – Derry</p> <p>Information received of 2 suspected drug overdoses / hospitalisation because of drugs ingestion, with unverified suspicion that Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) was involved</p> <p><i>Action: No further information was provided by partners to corroborate or dispute this</i></p>  |
| 20 <sup>th</sup> December 2019 | <p>MSJ</p> <p>Report received that a bag of blue tablets marked with MSJ has been found in Belfast, reported by a local community worker and has been disposed of in the RAPID bin. Previous reports of MSJ</p>  |

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|                               | <p>fake diazepam has caused some concern in the past</p> <p><i>Action: Insufficient information to issue an DAMIS alert</i></p>   |
| 6 <sup>th</sup> January 2020  | <p>Heroin strength</p> <p>Information received that a number of users are reporting that there is high strength heroin currently in circulation in the Belfast area</p> <p><i>Action: DAMIS alert issued 7<sup>th</sup> January 2020</i></p>  |
| 10 <sup>th</sup> January 2020 | <p>WEDINOS results</p> <p>The white tablets sent to WEDINOS in Sept 19 have been tested. They had the appearance of alprazolam (Xanax) but contained flualprazolam instead.</p> <p>This is the 3rd of 3 potential Xanax tablets/bars sent to WEDINOS for testing. None contained alprazolam but flualprazolam instead, an analogue of alprazolam, and stronger again gram for gram, according to one user report on Bluelight. The duration of effect is reportedly 6-12 hours.</p> <p>As a result it may be worth informing alprazolam users and relevant support staff that Xanax sold in Belfast is likely to be flualprazolam instead. It's potency and duration of effect may be more than alprazolam, therefore may be more likely to inhibit memory formation which is a factor in early redosing and mixing with other drugs, both of which can lead to overdose. All of the samples sent for testing had the appearance of Xanax bars, although they were crudely made representations and obviously not made by a pharma company.</p> <p><i>Action: DAMIS alert issued 14<sup>th</sup> January 2020</i></p> |
| 20 <sup>th</sup> January 2020 | <p>Worrying trend developing in Ballymena</p> <p>Information received regarding some deaths recently where a trend known as 'huffing' has been either the direct cause of death or a contributing factor.</p> <p>Further information provided of two incidents recently in Ballymena area where huffing may have been a contributing factor to death, awaiting toxicology results for both incidents at this stage.</p> <p><i>Action: DAMIS alert issued 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020</i></p>   |
| 27 <sup>th</sup> January 2020 | <p>'China White'</p> <p>Information received that a staff member advised that 'China White' is present in a Armagh hostel. Staff are aware and are taking precautionary measures.</p> <p><i>Action: No further information was provided by partners to corroborate or dispute this</i></p>  |

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| <p>14<sup>th</sup> February<br/>2020</p> | <p>EMCDDA advisory notice</p> <p>An advisory notice has been issued through Early Warning System Networks by the EMCDDA regarding the potential risks of a potent synthetic opioid and has added it to the list of new psychoactive substances under intensive monitoring due to the potential health risks that it may pose.</p> <p><i>Action: Email sent onto DAMIS Steering group for information</i></p>   |
| <p>4<sup>th</sup> March<br/>2020</p>     | <p>DMT overdose</p> <p>Information was received from a service provider and a practitioner regarding a service user within a Derry hostel who overdosed after taking DMT (Dimethyltryptamine - a hallucinogenic tryptamine) which was in crystalline powder form. The service user reported that they had snorted the drug.</p> <p>The service user's presentation was consistent with hallucinogen use; they were red faced and extremely warm- boiling to touch, (despite being in their underwear) - there was no visible sweating. They struggled to speak, had dilated pupils, experienced difficulty opening/closing their eyes, experienced chest pains, had trouble breathing, was writhing around the bed and was unable to get off the bed. The service user was taken to hospital</p> <p>Further information confirmed the services has since been discharged from hospital.</p> <p><i>Action: No further information was provided by partners to corroborate or dispute this</i></p> |
| <p>10<sup>th</sup> March<br/>2020</p>    | <p>Nitrous Oxide</p> <p>A report was received from a service provider regarding a number of finds of Nitrous Oxide over the past week at various locations across Belfast.</p> <p><i>Action: No further information was provided by partners to corroborate or dispute this</i></p>  |
| <p>25<sup>th</sup> March<br/>2020</p>    | <p>COVID-19 impact on drug supply</p> <p>The drugs team at PHE are keen to monitor how the current COVID-19 situation is affecting the drug market.</p> <p>If you become aware of any developments in the market that could be a cause for concern, please could you email our drug alerts inbox so that we can respond, and keep the rest of the DHART network and our other contacts informed.</p> <p><i>Action: DAMIS request for further information issued 26<sup>th</sup> March 2020</i></p>   |

## Alerts issued by DAMIS during October 2019 – March 2020

In some cases, more information was sought either from the original informant, or from other experts in the field (addictions staff, homeless staff and drug users) and DAMIS partners continued to monitor the situation. In some cases, information was sent to specific groups, for example GP Practices, or Needle Exchange Providers, if the information was particularly relevant to / or would impact on their client group.

In some cases, information was considered to be of sufficient urgency for it to be circulated to the full DAMIS database in the form of an 'alert'. Information of general interest was also circulated to the full DAMIS database. Formal emails issued are shown in the table below. Unless specified otherwise, these were sent to the full DAMIS database.

| <b>Formal emails circulated by DAMIS to the full DAMIS database<br/>October 2019 – March 2020</b> |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Date</b>   | <b>Topic</b>   |
| 24 <sup>th</sup> October 2019   | <p><b>DAMIS Alert – potential fake Diazepam (5mgs)</b></p> <p>DAMIS has received information from a local homelessness hostel in Coleraine regarding the presence of potential fake Diazepam (5mgs) in the Coleraine and Portrush area.</p> <p>These tablets are now being produced and sold as yellow Diazepam, rather than blue, with the letters MSJ on the front of them, unlike prescribed Diazepam. It is reported that these tablets are causing people to black out and lose consciousness.</p> <p>Harm reduction advice on benzodiazepine provided with request for further information</p> |
| 25 <sup>th</sup> October 2019   | <p><b>DAMIS Alert – Needle Exchange within Belfast City Centre</b></p> <p>DAMIS informed network members that Boots took the decision to withdraw the NSES service from the Donegall Place branch, in Belfast City Centre from 1<sup>st</sup> November 2020.</p> <p>Contact detail information on the nearest needle exchanges and service providers was provided.</p>   |
| 14 <sup>th</sup> November 2019  | <p><b>DAMIS Alert – recent suspected drug related deaths</b></p> <p>DAMIS has received information of at least three recent suspected drug related deaths in the Ards /Comber area and three suspected drug related deaths in the Ballymena area. While at this stage it is not known what, if any, substances had been taken, it is believed that the individuals may have</p>  |

|                                |  |
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|                                | <p>taken heroin and, in some circumstances, along with fentanyl.</p> <p>Harm reduction advice and contact details for Take Home Naloxone programme provided as well as a request for further information</p>   |
| 19 <sup>th</sup> November 2019 | <p><b>DAMIS Alert – recent suspected drug related deaths</b></p> <p>DAMIS has received information of five suspected drug related drugs over the weekend within the Greater Belfast area. While it is not known at this stage what, if any, substances had been taken, it is believed that the individuals may have taken heroin and, in some circumstances, poly drug use.</p> <p>Harm reduction advice and contact details for Take Home Naloxone programme provided as well as a request for further information</p>  |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> December 2019  | <p><b>DAMIS Alert – further suspected drug related death in Belfast</b></p> <p>DAMIS has received information of a further suspected drug related death in Belfast. While it is not known at this stage what, if any, substances had been taken, it is believed that the individual may have taken methadone and ‘blues’ the previous night, with open packets of what is believed to be Pregabalin found.</p> <p>DAMIS has also been informed of another individual who is in a critically condition following a reported overdose, with remnants of powder substance and a quantity of pills found.</p> <p>Harm reduction advice, information on Pregabalin and contact details for Take Home Naloxone programme provided as well as a request for further information</p> <p><i>(Further information received that the second individual subsequently died from a suspected overdose)</i></p> |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> January 2020   | <p><b>DAMIS Alert – high strength heroin</b></p> <p>DAMIS has received information from a number of users reporting that there is high strength heroin currently in circulation in Belfast at present.</p> <p>Harm reduction advice and contact details for Take Home Naloxone programme provided as well as a request for further information</p>   |
| 14 <sup>th</sup> January 2020  | <p><b>DAMIS Alert – sample result flualprazolam</b></p> <p>DAMIS has been notified that a result for a white tablet sent for analysis by a DAMIS Network member organisation has come back as flualprazolam, an analogue of alprazolam which is commonly known as Xanax. It had the appearance</p>   |

|                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
|                               | <p>of alprazolam (Xanax) albeit crudely made representations therefore not manufactured by a pharma company.</p> <p>This result shows that novel benzodiazepines such as this continue to be in circulation in the Belfast area.</p> <p>Harm reduction advice, information on Pregabalin and alprazolam provided with contact details for Take Home Naloxone programme provided as well as a request for further information</p>   |
| 23 <sup>rd</sup> January 2020 | <p><b>DAMIS Information requested – Volatile Substance Abuse</b></p> <p>Following two incidents recently in the Ballymena area where a trend known as ‘huffing’ may have been either the direct cause of death or a contributing factor. ‘Huffing’ is the street term for sniffing / inhaling aerosols and other readily available household products.</p> <p>In both cases the individuals were drug users and inhaled aerosols, both matters are awaiting toxicology results at this stage.</p> <p>Harm reduction advice provided as well as a request for further information</p> |
| 6 <sup>th</sup> February 2020 | <p><b>PHA Press release – Take Home Naloxone reverses more than 200 overdoses</b></p> <p>New figures from the Public Health Agency show that the Take Home Naloxone programme has seen naloxone administered 240 times in 2018-19 and has been successful in reversing an opiate overdose in over 90% cases.</p> <p>The full press release can be viewed at <a href="#">Take home naloxone reverses more 200 overdoses</a></p> <p>The 2018-19 Annual report on the supply and use of Take Home Naloxone can be found at <a href="#">Naloxone Reports</a></p>                         |
| 26 <sup>th</sup> March 2020   | <p><b>DAMIS Request For Information - Drug monitoring re COVID-19</b></p> <p>Public Health England and the Department of Health (NI) are keen to monitor how the current COVID-19 situation is potentially affecting / changing the drug market.</p> <p>Request for information on any developments or changes in the drug market that could be a cause for concern.</p>   |

27<sup>th</sup> March 2020

**DAMIS For information - PHA information on COVID-19**

For your information, please find below the web link to the Public Health Agency information on COVID-19.

[COVID-19 \(coronavirus\) | HSC Public Health Agency](#)

This website will provide access to relevant public health information and contains the most up to date information on COVID-19, including

- Information on social distancing
- Information on self-isolation
- Advice for individuals
- Guidance for organisations
- Guidance for employers

For information on looking after your mental and emotional wellbeing, please see the links below:

- [Coronavirus and your wellbeing](#) (Change your mind)
- [If you're worried about your mental health during coronavirus outbreak](#) (Samaritans)
- [Coronavirus and your mental wellbeing](#) (Scotland)

31<sup>st</sup> March 2020

**PHA Press release - Alcohol – Don't get locked**

Please see attached "Alcohol – Don't get locked in" leaflet for sharing with service users, staff as well as other interested parties.

This is also available on the PHA website - [Alcohol - don't get locked](#)

You can also find local help and support by visiting [Drugs and Alcohol | NI](#) and clicking on "Services near you".

## **DAMIS - Drug and Alcohol Monitoring and Information System Summary report**

### **What is DAMIS?**

DAMIS is an “early warning system” designed to identify, verify and assess emerging threats and potential trends in drug and alcohol misuse within Northern Ireland, so we can act quickly and provide relevant information or advice to those who misuse drugs or alcohol. The purpose of DAMIS is to share information via email amongst people who work with drug users within Northern Ireland (the DAMIS Network).

These people can provide information on emerging issues at a **very early** stage and are also ideally placed to provide targeted harm reduction information to their clients.

The kind of information DAMIS collects includes:

1. A sudden increase in a particular drug being misused
2. Drugs being misused in new ways
3. New drugs become available
4. Emergence of substances with unexpected unpleasant or dangerous effects.

The Department of Health oversee DAMIS with support from the lead partners: the Public Health Agency, the Department of Justice and the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

### **Collecting information**

Every year, Northern Ireland-wide surveys are carried out to find out what drugs people are using and how much alcohol they are drinking. This information helps organisations decide the priority actions required to reduce drug misuse or drug-related harm. However, these surveys are not designed to gather localised information on drugs being used by small numbers of people, or information on urgent issues such as contaminated drugs. This is what DAMIS is for. It can identify trends and issues at an early stage and warn people about them quickly.

The information which DAMIS receives usually comes from local drug and alcohol support organisations, or from people who misuse or have misused substances themselves. These people may have contact with a wide range of individuals who misuse substances and are in an ideal position to tell us what is happening in their local area as soon as it happens. While DAMIS can be used to alert people to emerging risks around alcohol as well as drugs, so far, all DAMIS alerts have focussed on drugs.

DAMIS is confidential – this means that when we collect information, we do not ask about who is misusing drugs. We do not need to know the names of individuals, but it can be useful for us to know general information like where drugs are being used,

and the gender and age of users. This can help tell us who is at risk and to which particular groups we may need to give information.

Anyone can send information to DAMIS at [damis@hscni.net](mailto:damis@hscni.net) .

### **What happens next?**

Each lead organisation has identified a named member of staff to coordinate this work. All information sent to DAMIS at [damis@hscni.net](mailto:damis@hscni.net) is received by the PHA DAMIS Coordinator, who removes any identifying details (e.g. who the email is from, or any information which could identify an individual drug user), then sends it on to the DAMIS Steering Group. The “level” of the information and what kind of response is needed is agreed by the DAMIS Steering Group.

#### Level One:

A level one response will be to record the information which may be used to inform policy and practice.

#### Level two:

A level two response means that the information will be circulated the information to everyone on the DAMIS database, either to seek more information, or as an alert or a bulletin. We ask everyone on the database to pass the information on as appropriate.

Alert – an alert is an email sent quickly (usually within 24 hours of receiving information) warning people of a specific risk. An alert may be sent when we still have limited evidence, but the need to inform people of a possible risk outweighs the need to collect more evidence.

Bulletin – if we need more information on an issue, a request for information is sent to the DAMIS network. Information received can then be pulled together and sent out as a bulletin. This takes longer than an alert to produce, but can provide a fuller picture of the Northern Ireland situation.

#### Level three:

A level three response means that a formal warning letter is issued through Chief Medical Officer procedures, and consideration is given to information/awareness raising with the public.

### **Who is on the DAMIS database?**

The database includes around 480 people, individuals who work for specialist drug and alcohol services, or for services that work with or treat people who misuse drugs or alcohol (for example homeless services, or Emergency Departments (ED's)). These people have access to information on emerging drugs and their impact on

people who use them, and are ideally placed to pass on timely information to DAMIS. Their roles also give them the opportunity to provide timely harm reduction information to their clients. Much of the information sent out through DAMIS is practical advice aimed at reducing the harms to people from their drug use. It is aimed at adults and those working with young people should exercise their professional judgement to ensure that any information passed on to people under 18 is appropriate.

People who wish to be added to the DAMIS Network can contact the PHA coordinator to request an application form, by emailing [damis@hscni.net](mailto:damis@hscni.net), which they can complete, indicating their role in provision of drug and alcohol, and/or other related services.

## **Drug and Alcohol Monitoring Information System (DAMIS)**

### **Application to sign up to DAMIS Network**

DAMIS is an “early warning system” designed to identify, verify and assess emerging threats and potential trends in drug and alcohol misuse within Northern Ireland. It is an information sharing tool in support of the wider DAMIS partnership which comprises Department of Health, Department of Justice, Public Health Agency, Police Service of Northern Ireland and Forensic Service Northern Ireland. Representatives from these agencies form the DAMIS Steering Group, and they make decisions about how to act on any information received.

The purpose of DAMIS is to share information via email amongst people who work with drug users within Northern Ireland (the DAMIS Network). These people can provide information on emerging issues at a **very early** stage and are also ideally placed to provide targeted harm reduction information to their clients.

The kind of information DAMIS collects and shares includes:

1. A sudden increase in a particular drug being misused
2. Drugs being misused in new ways
3. New drugs become available
4. Emergence of substances with unexpected unpleasant or dangerous effects.

Because DAMIS is an early warning system and information fed into it is acted upon quickly, emails sent to the DAMIS Network are often based on anecdotal and/or unsubstantiated evidence and should be treated with initial caution. Many of the reports received by DAMIS are second or third-hand information from a single source, and are not supported by any additional evidence.

If information received by DAMIS is substantiated then the Steering Group considers how best to further share that information with the target groups. Evidence suggests that providing warnings about drugs to the whole population, the majority of whom do not use drugs, can normalise drug use, and increase experimentation with drugs. It is therefore vital that information is shared appropriately. Sometimes, the need to get information to a wider audience is sufficient that DAMIS will issue a media alert to raise awareness among the public.

Much of the information sent out through DAMIS is practical advice aimed at reducing the harms to people from their drug use. DAMIS is aimed at adults. Those working with young people should exercise their professional judgement to ensure that any information passed on to people under 18 is appropriate.

## **DAMIS Network Application Form**

If you are interested in receiving Drug and Alcohol alerts please fill in the required information below.

**Name:**

**Organisation:**

**Job title:**

**Email address:**

**Please outline why you would like to receive these alerts and who you will share these with:**

**Those registered with the Drug and Alcohol Monitoring Information System can email information they have on substances of concern to a central email address of PHA coordinators who will share information with the DAMIS partners. (*DAMIS is a confidential system and the identity of anyone who sends in emails is seen only by the PHA coordinators*). Please outline how your job / role will enable you to provide information to DAMIS:**

**I have read the information on page 1, and understand the purpose of DAMIS, and will seek to ensure that I treat any information I receive from DAMIS appropriately.**

**Signed:**

**Date:**