

Case Study

Drugs by the barrel TruNarc as a tool for prevention

Huge drug busts take tons of illicit drugs off the streets; and while each major bust is a victory in itself for law enforcement, as well as relief for the many potential users and victims, it's just as important to stop the flow of drug manufacturing materials, since without them, illegal labs can't manufacture their illegal products. But therein lies the catch; many kinds of drugs are quickly recognizable, and detectable, due to their packaging, appearance, or other factors. But what about seemingly innocuous materials such as acetone? A jerry can of acetone in a van might be simply on its way to a paint store.

It's not enough to merely be able to identify drugs when, for example, police investigators stop a vehicle; but law enforcement needs a quick way to identify substances used in the manufacture of drugs, and put the facts together with practice, knowledge, and experience in order to correctly identify the intended use. As such, seemingly innocent materials become less than innocent, so accurate identification is key.

Suspicious husband and wife stopped by Police

Recently, in the Netherlands, police arrested a husband and wife team acting suspiciously in a van with Polish license plates, parked at hotel De Druiventros on the Bosscheweg in Berkel-Enschot. Berkel-Enschot is a Dutch village, located in the municipality of Tilburg in the North Brabant province of The Netherlands, bordering Belgium. The couple had no permanent address, adding to police suspicions.

“Possession of the solvent acetone is not illegal in itself but finding such a large quantity of it was a tip-off to the police that it was probably intended for the manufacture of Ecstasy pills”



Photo Courtesy
De Kort Media

Thermo Fisher Scientific™ TuNarc™ Handheld Narcotics Analyzer

Upon inspection of the interior of the van, it was found to contain several blue plastic barrels of the type often used to transport innocent products ranging from concentrated fruit juice to fish bait; but they are also known for being used to transport chemicals as well as drugs. But the discovery of a jerry can of acetone among the barrels raised a red flag for police checking out what was originally simply a suspicious vehicle.

Police closed off the hotel parking lot and brought in the ThermoFisher TruNarc™ analyzer to identify the substances in the back of the van. TruNarc is a hand-held Raman device used to rapidly screen and identify drugs, adulterants, and drug precursors in the field. It is used by law enforcement, forensic, and customs enforcement agencies to develop a preliminary identification of unknown materials at the point of interdiction. TruNarc quickly identifies a wide range of

illegal drugs including narcotics, synthetic drugs including methamphetamine, cutting agents, and precursor materials. Analysis is performed in a single test, portable, hand-held, on the spot, in 30 seconds or less per sample, and it is capable of identifying up to 247 prohibited substances and can scan for more than 450 suspected controlled substances in a single, definitive test. Advantages of the TruNarc include the short amount of time required for testing (almost instant results), the ability to scan through common evidence packaging materials, and no destruction or consumption of the evidence.

The husband and wife found in the van were arrested and held while the investigation proceeded. They weren't from the area and didn't have satisfactory answers, when queried by police, as to why they were in the hotel parking lot in the first place. Police opened up the van and



began examining the barrels and other containers. TruNarc was employed on the scene to quickly identify the contents; it turns out that there were approximately 25 jerry cans in the van in addition to the number of large blue barrels, and at least one of the jerry cans was filled with acetone, as a quick check with TruNarc indicated.

Acetone was the red flag

The acetone raised a red flag, because it is known to be a raw material for manufacturing the drug known as 'Ecstasy'. Ecstasy is the street name for a version of MDMA, or 3,4 methylenedioxy-methamphetamine. It is an illegal, synthetic drug classified as a stimulant with potentially hallucinogenic properties. Overdosing on ecstasy can cause seizures, foaming at the mouth and a spike in body temperature. These can cause heatstroke or aggravate an underlying heart condition, both of which can prove to be fatal.

Possession of the solvent acetone is not illegal in itself but finding such a large quantity of it was a tip-off to the police that it was probably intended for the manufacture of Ecstasy pills. After the investigation by the police with the TruNarc analyzer, and later upon verification with the FirstDefender Chemical Identification Analyzer, it was confirmed that a total of 400 Liters of Formamide, also known as methanamide, and 1545 liters of Acetone were discovered. These are all substances used to manufacture synthetic drugs, and all were contained in barrels of 200, 60 and 25 liters, a spokesperson for the police reported later in the evening.

A specialized chemical spill control company from Amsterdam subsequently emptied the van and carefully disposed of the barrels and jerry cans. The van was seized and the couple were charged. Thanks to quick detection and confirmation of the acetone by TruNarc, literally thousands of potential Ecstasy pills never made it to the streets.



Thermo Fisher Scientific™ FirstDefender™ Chemical Identification Analyzers

Find out more at thermofisher.com/trunarc