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**ECSTASY IN
AMSTERDAM**
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THIS MAN IS AN OFFICIAL ECSTASY TESTER



Jaap Jamin at Jellinek with one week's selection of ecstasy tablets, ready to go off to the lab for testing. Photo: Jack Aarts

... he works for a Government sanctioned drugs agency who test ecstasy, in a



THIS IS THE ECSTASY TESTING LABORATORY



Photo: Jack Aarts

IN Amsterdam nobody walks anywhere, and they still don't have traffic jams. The Dutch use bicycles, mopeds and roller blades to glide through their city at admirable speed. There are cycle paths everywhere and cars stop for bikes. As the Dutch will tell you, every driver has a bike too.

The policy on drugs here is equally clear-eyed. The possession of small amounts of drugs for personal use is not treated as a criminal act. The police make no express efforts to detect and prosecute users. Dealing in small amounts of soft drugs is also tolerated and led in the 1970s to the formation of the famous marijuana 'coffee shops'.

But there is also a tolerance towards those who use hard drugs. The Dutch have looked around at the 'all out war on drugs' policies of neighbouring countries and said 'not for us'. Such authoritarian methods go right against the grain of what is essentially a liberal thinking people.

The Dutch call this 'Normalisation' because they don't want people who take drugs to be marginalised outside mainstream society, outside of help and advice, believing themselves beyond nor-

mality. They call it 'Harm Reduction' because the Dutch believe that if people are going to do drugs, they should do them as safely as possible. And that means more than free water and medics on site. Harm Reduction Dutch-style means being able to get your E's checked out before you take them.

The ecstasy scene in Holland bears many similarities to the scene in England. Ecstasy is primarily used as a 'dance drug' at parties and raves, and users often get ripped off with fakes. But the differences are more interesting. Many of the people who produce ecstasy in Holland started making the drug with ideological rather than financial aims - they're called 'missionary producers'. There have been only seven possible ecstasy-related deaths in Holland - mainly from overheating but two because of liver malfunctions. It was these deaths which prompted the Dutch Government into action and part of that action was its Harm Reduction policy. Rather than penalise people for taking the drug, the Government decided, amongst other things, to give them the opportunity to find out exactly what drugs they were taking.

the Ecstasy testers

THE SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

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insurance companies and the Dutch Ministry Of Justice. One of its managing directors is Jaap Jamin, whose bright red jacket and beautifully clashing dark red trousers make him seem at least ten years younger than his 42 years.

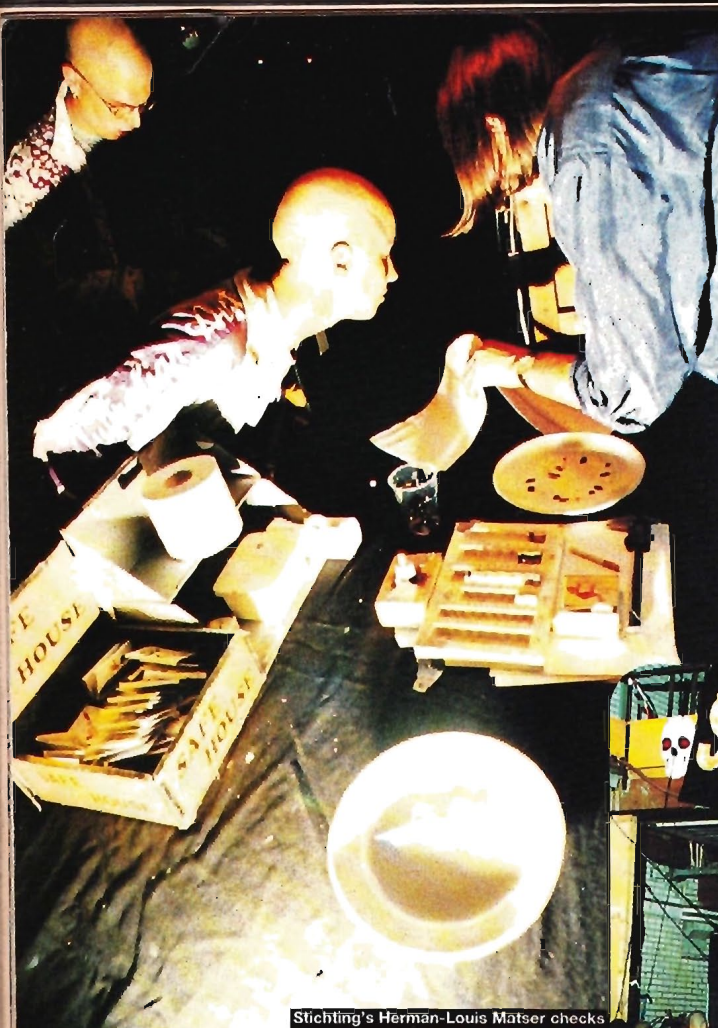
In 1989 Jamin and original street drugs worker August de Loor began testing ecstasy tablets to find out exactly what was in them. Although what they were doing was in effect illegal, they managed to find an analyst who was

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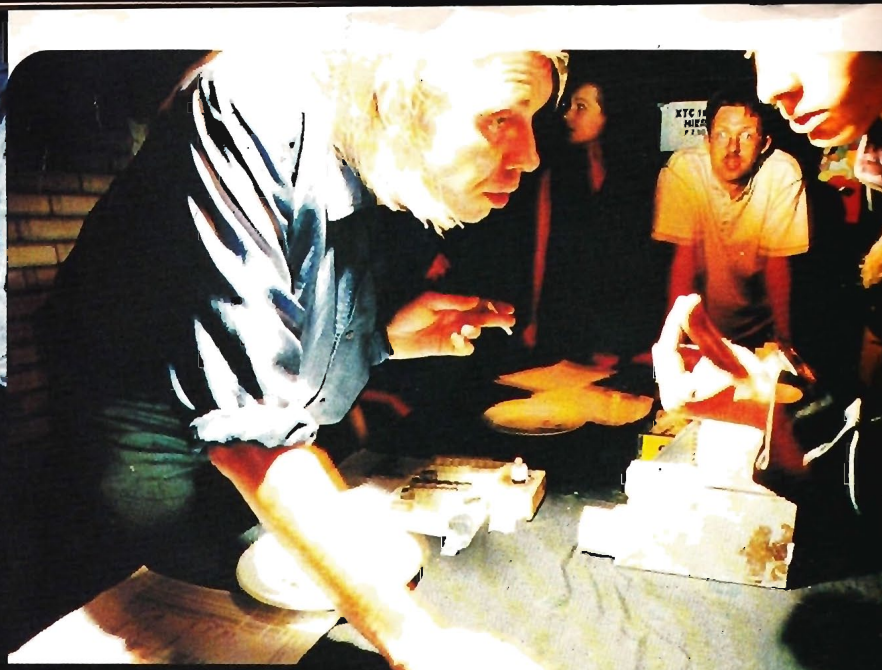


the Ecstasy

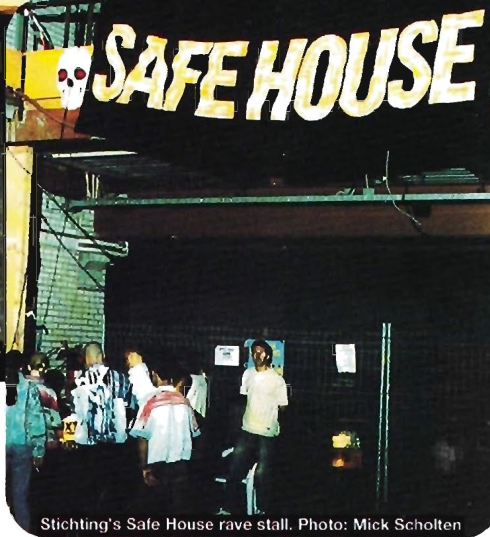
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Stichting's Herman-Louis Matser checks the Ecstasy list. Photo: Mick Scholten



Matser takes time to talk to ravers, and make sure they keep to a 'sensible' dose. Photo: Mick Scholten



Stichting's Safe House rave stall. Photo: Mick Scholten

to the National Institute Of Alcohol & Drugs who send them to a lab in Rotterdam for testing.

70% of the people who use this service are small time dealers. They may have bought 50 or 100 pills and consider it worth the sacrifice of one pill to know that what they are selling is the real deal. A sample of one week in the testing of pills shows just how valuable it can be - the pills can range in strength from three mgms of MDMA to 330 mgms. They can range from MDMA (which is the real ecstasy compound) to MDEA (less potent, but still generally happy in effect) to MDA (the more 'mongy', trippy sort found in the snowballs which were about in the UK a few years ago) to caffeine and amphetamine.

The irony of the Government funding tests which are in effect outlawed does not escape Jamin but he is generally scathing of those who worry about bureaucracy.

"We could wait ten years before a change in the law but people are dying so let's do it. I notice [drug agency] professionals, in other countries saying, 'But you're sticking out your necks, you're risking your job,' and I say, 'Yes but you're not standing up for your own target group.'"

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At the same time he has received countless requests to test pills from England and Germany. This, he says, would go against the whole point of the testing. "We would be polluting the system, we want to have an overview of ecstasy in Holland. And in Europe we are already a bit 'crazy Dutch'. If we are going to help foreign consumers, it would create more problems."

ECSTASY testing is of course not fail-safe. The dealers who bring their pills to Jamin are the dealers who want

slowly for him, feels that this is one sensible move.

"It's consumer education. Instead of just dropping a few pills, you can behave more accurately, you can be more responsible for your own body. We try to address young people as self-responsible people."

Jamin believes that most people who take ecstasy do take it responsibly but that the media chooses to focus on the very small group who take it like candy. His main worry for the people who overdo it is that they will deplete the Serotonin levels in their brain.

"If people use it drastically, the main thing I'm afraid of is that they can get depressed. It's got a lot of impact and if you're unstable it can knock you over." Jamin focuses on the very small group who take it like candy. His main worry for the people who overdo it is that they will deplete the Serotonin levels in their brain.

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Jamin believes that ecstasy can produce neurotoxicity when taken in too high doses. A 'safe' dose would be about one and a half to two and a half milligrams per kilogram of body weight (a 12 stone person could consume 190 milligrams). Taking anything over this amount could produce neurotoxicity which can in turn lead to depression. Stopping for a while can reverse neurotoxicity, he argues, and stopping for a year can normally restore everything. So does he think there are no irreversible effects? He shakes his head and then states flatly: "Well, you can die if you're allergic to it!" before laughing at his own jump of logic.

Jamin has taken ecstasy himself and is refreshingly

experience, I see most of the people improving but for some it's not good. But it's stupid to focus only on the drug."

Jamin goes on to explain his triangular theory, that anyone experiencing a drug has to consider three things. First there is the drug, the dosage, how often it's been taken before, then there is the person, their character, stability and psychological profile, finally there are the circumstances in which the drug is taken, the setting.

"I think the main message about drugs is that, say, a teenager starts to consume alcohol to socialise more easily and that's fine. If they like it and learn from the experience they can copy it in their non-toxic life. The problem is when you get hooked on certain substances and you can't perform the way you want when you're not under the influence."

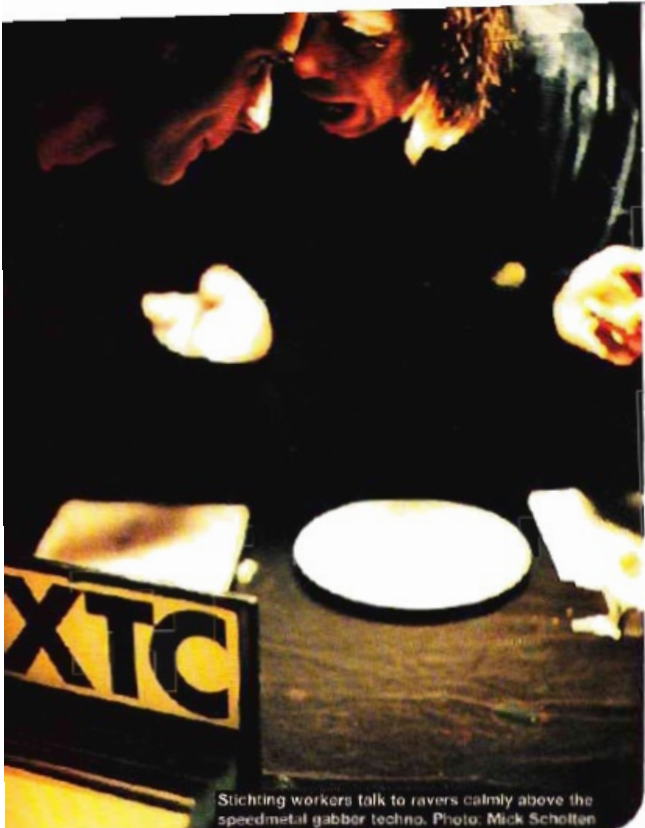
THE FRONTLINE Testing At Raves

STICHTING Adviesburo Drugs is a much smaller organisation. It is funded from the Ministry of Health, the City Council and NIAD but it is largely an independent drugs advisory service. Stichting also operates outside office hours because this is when most drugs are consumed. Tonight, two of Stichting's workers - Herman-Louis Matser and Abel Arkenboat - are going to travel two hours South to Helmont where the organisers of a rave have asked them to set up their mobile ecstasy testing unit. Stichting's mobile testing unit operates outside office hours because this is when most drugs are consumed. Tonight, two of Stichting's workers - Herman-Louis Matser and Abel Arkenboat - are going to travel two hours South to Helmont where the organisers of a rave have asked them to set up their mobile ecstasy testing unit.

"In the beginning this was easy," says Matser. "There were three pills. There was the pink one, the white one and the white one with stripes. Now there are six or seven hundred different ones."

Matser remembers that the different brands of ecstasy used to stay on the market for five, seven, eight months - even a year. Now they stay around for a month and then another brand replaces them. Although Matser has a good working knowledge of ecstasy, he is willing to accept that in Helmont there may well be one or two brands he hasn't seen yet.

It's 5.30pm on a Saturday and Stichting are getting ready for the long night. On the seemingly endless drive



Stichting workers talk to ravers calmly above the speedmetal gabber techno. Photo: Mick Scholten

exhausting. They have generated controversy in the past, at first the police didn't like what they were doing and for a while they were not allowed but they are now back in demand. The rave organisers ask for and pay for them. To prevent an all out rush at their table they charge each customer a token two guilders (around 80p).

An 'ecstasy' pill could be a whole number of things. It could be the real thing - MDMA - but the dosage could vary enormously. It could be MDEA - very similar but with slightly different effects, shorter lasting and with a sudden come up and finish. It could be MDA - lasting eight hours and including hallucinations - or it could be speed. There is, says Matser, a lot of speed being sold as E at the moment, or it could be a fake E which could contain literally anything.

Matser would not take anything without knowing what was in it. The last time he swallowed anything 'blind' it turned out to be PCP and five times the normal dose. "I was lying on my bed thinking, 'Is this nice? - no!' Now I never take anything without checking what's in it."

The difficulty with tonight's work for Stichting is not the system which they say is beautifully simple but with the consumers. After testing, Stichting have to advise people on their pills, an activity which requires international levels of diplomacy.

"It depends very much on the people. If it's a big guy and you tell him his pill is too strong, he's going to take five. You say something like, 'This will do something bad to your stomach.' Women are much more sensible, they listen to the advice and take it in halves or even quarters."

Matser agrees with Jamin that there is only a minority of people who overdo it. "Most people use it in a very sensible way and in a way that they get the advantages of it. People who go very heavy on it either stop or start using it in a non-heavy way. No one goes on forever. It's just trying to find your limits, it's the risks you face - there's no difference with a motorcycle," he says.

"The second most popular question we get asked is, 'What's the best pill?' laughs Matser. And the most popular question? 'What's the best pill?' he says again. So what is the best pill?

"I don't know. I always say I know the best pill for me but I don't know what is the best pill for you to take. I don't know what you're like." He goes on to explain his philosophy of trying to help people get more out of less. One of the benefits of testing, he says, is that people can no longer blame a bad evening on a bad E.

"What worries me most about ecstasy is that people attribute everything good to the pill or everything bad to

the pill. It's the wrong way to use it. It's a quite subtle drug. From nothing you can't make something great. It can only make a good evening a very good evening."

AT 7.30pm we arrive at the vast industrial warehouse space that is to be our home for the evening. It is early but already 150 eager beavers spill in as the doors open. The place is vast, plastic skulls are hung everywhere, so are T-shirts with skull logos advertising the 'Rotterdam Terror Corps'. The music is heavy, heavy techno: fast, hard, pounding and relentless. There are about 20 boys to one girl and three quarters of the boys have skinheads, shell suit tops and tough looking faces.

Matser and Abel start setting up their table. The first thing out is a fruit machine full of novelty condoms, the second a box of free condoms. "If they test, they can take a condom, if they don't test they can take a condom, it's the most effective anti-AIDS campaign there is."

Soon the table is set up. It is clearly marked 'Safe House' and flyers are placed around the building. This is Stichting's first time in Helmont but as soon as the flyers go up - "XTC test hier F2.50 (£1)" - it attracts some hopefuls. A boy of about 18 comes over and offers his pill. Matser tells him not yet.

Stichting have a long night ahead of them. "I start when I'm ready," says Matser. The boy walks away looking cross. Two girls come over and ask. Matser tells them to come back in a little while. He has finished setting up now but rolls a joint not wanting to be rushed. Another boy comes up and asks for his pill to be tested. "The earlier you start the sooner it's over," Matser tells him. He thinks about this for a moment and then agrees, putting his pill away.

The table is now set up. There are two large white dinner plates, a bottle of acid with a dropper in it, a Stanley knife, an electronic measuring device and, the key to it all, a print out of the currently available ecstasy tablets.

At 8 o'clock, Matser is ready to start. The first customer approaches: a shell-suited skinhead. Matser takes his pill and scrapes off a minuscule amount with a Stanley knife. He then adds a drop of acid. The acid turns purple-blue so Matser takes the pill and slides it into an electronic measuring device which measures up the pills diameter and weight exactly. Next he thumbs quickly through the five page manuscript listing all the brands currently available. This is the most arduous part of the task. Finally he locates a description which fits and handing the customer back his pill, he explains what it is. The customer is called Gerard and he is 20 years old.

"He told me that it was a good pill," says Gerard, "that it was MDMA and that it was a light pill - only 80-85 milligrams. I get it checked because I just bought 50 and I want to sell them. They could be aspirins and I want to know what I sell."

A QUEUE is now beginning to form at the table. The most amazing thing about tonight isn't the testing but the speed with which the two men from Stichting work. Each test takes about two minutes. If the acid turns blue, it is worth measuring the pill and looking up to see which MDMA, MDEA or MDA brand it could be and this, in the face of such noise, requires intense concentration. If the acid turns orange it could be a speed pill, and if nothing happens, then it could be anything.

By 8.15pm, seven pills have been tested. Four turned blue and warranted a measure and a look up amongst the 500 brands on the lists, two turned orange and one showed no colour at all. The owner has a long chat with Matser.

"I told him not to take it, it could be anything, it could be dangerous. He agreed and decided not to take it. It's very rare they contend it unless they're so far away, it doesn't hurt them anymore."

Another shell-suiter arrives with a group of friends and

proceeds to hand his pill over. It is MDMA with a 90-100 milligram content and they leave looking happy.

It's getting on for 9 o'clock and things are hotting up. The monotonous, industrially-heavy noise of the music is going up and people are now flooding in. This music is known as gabber which is produced "hubba" and means, in Dutch, "gaezer" or "scally" or "oi!". The increasing number of people dancing to it do so by jumping up and down very fast.

Two extremely hard looking 'gabbers' (as gabber fans are called) come over to the testing table. They hand over two pills, one white and one bright red. The white pill checks out fine, the red one doesn't respond to the test. Matser says he is not surprised, he thought it was dodgy from the look of it. He can recognise some pills by looking. "There's a beige pill with a dollar sign on it that's going round. It makes everybody sick for a very long time."

A couple come over, it is the girl who wants to get her pill tested. Matser looks through his list at the names, Bunny, Spikkel, Jumbo, one named after a famous make of car, and locates her pill. It is one of the Bunnies. He tells her it is a low dose MDMA pill - 80-85mg - but a whole one should be enough. They leave. "If a guy is rushing into taking his pill," Matser explains, "you can make him go slowly by using the girl, it works very well."

Another boy comes over to have his pill checked. Matser looks at it and smiles broadly. He shows me the pill, it is white and the logo divides into four. "This is a clove. The producer asked me which stamp to use and I chose this one!"

It is 9pm and there are over 20 little pools of acid on one of the dinner plates. A skinhead looks particularly happy with his 90-100 mgm Bunny and necks it then and there. Two uniformed police show up, one male, one female. They are genial and smiling. Matser explains how the test works.

"It's good," says the female police officer of the test. "I'd never seen it before but they are using drugs anyway so it's good to have a test." Her male colleague agrees: "It's a very good precaution. People have taken things and then collapsed, it's always good to have a test possibility."

BETWEEN 11pm and 1am the small 'Safe House' table in the corner of the hardest rave in Helmont is mobbed. Matser and Abel work methodically and more quickly than you can believe. Over the pounding beat of the hardest music possible, they listen to what their customers are saying and advise them on their pills. So what do the consumers think?

"I have a brown Bunny which has 120 milligrams of



"What worries me most about ecstasy is that people attribute everything good to the pill or everything bad to the pill... it's quite a drug," says Stichting's Herman-Louis Matser. Photo: Mick Scholten



A 'dolphin' E, in for testing at Jelinek. Photo: Jack Aarts

MDMA," says John who is 18. "I don't know what that means but I know it's a very good pill. I also have this white Bunny which I thought was a normal pill but it's a speed pill so I will ask for my money back." John goes off and reappears less than five minutes later, money refunded, 'safe' pill swallowed, satisfied customer.

Gertjan is 19 and anxious looking. He got his pills tested and found that they contained 60-80 milligrams of MDMA.

"I want safety. I use drugs and it's not good to use drugs but if you use them, use them good. I also tested my speed to see if it was good and it was. I only want the best 'cos it's very unhealthy to use drugs."

Yessica is 18 and is getting her drugs checked out for very good reasons. "I'm afraid when I take that things are going to happen that I don't want. I was crying once because of too strong E and I don't like it so I always test it."

Yessica took half of her E before she tested it and nothing had happened in a half hour. She got the other half tested and found it to be 140 milligrams of MDMA. She is advised to wait another half an hour before taking the other half as it is a fairly strong E.

"I almost died once," she says. "I took a pill once which was 340 milligrams, that's like three pills in one. My brother took me to the first aid and tried to get me out of it. This is very safe, it's good that there is this."

Shangal who is 20 and drug free is getting a pill checked for a friend. The friend has taken one and then heard about the testing booth. Stichting told Shangal that his pill was half MDMA and half unidentifiable. They advised him not to take it.

"My friend wants one more because he is not up but this is not a good pill, he will not take it. This is the 100% truth what these people say."

The biggest man at the rave has just arrived to get his pills tested. Paul is 31 and just over six foot. He must weigh at least 16 stone and much of this is concentrated in his huge, pumped up chest and arms. After testing he disappears for a few minutes to consume and comes back to chat. His pill contains 180mgm of MDMA he tells me, and he's just taken six.

"I want to know that I'm safe, that they are good pills, no rubbish in it. I think six is a good amount to take - I've taken many risks so this is a small risk."

Paul admits that if they told him that his pills were 300 milligrams he would still have taken six. He says he is beginning to go funny. "I've taken ten at one time. I go to the moon, it was marvellous, that's what I like. I want to go to the moon. It's nice music yeah? I love you, if there was a registrar here I would marry you now!"

Tonight, Stichting have a couple of extra helpers on the table. Sylvester Aboikoui and Marion Herben are training to be street drugs workers. Tonight they're getting practical training in ecstasy testing. The hope is that they can take testing onto the street.

"It's very important to have prevention on the floor," says Sylvester. "Young people experiment with drugs,

all humankind does. It's good to be able to say - it's your choice, I want to help you use it safely."

By 2am the frantic activity on the testing table has died down. Every 15 minutes or so another person will appear and want a pill tested but most people just stop for a chat. By now the two men can tell a few of the pills just by looking. They know what is on offer here tonight.

For such hard-looking people and hard sounding music, the atmosphere is incredibly peaceable. Matser says that in attending 3-400 of these raves, he has seen just one incident of violence. The people coming up now are more keen on chatting than testing. Someone comes to get his pill tested and thrusts it at Matser. Matser indicates the joint that he is rolling and the boy nods apologetically and waits.

Many people come and ask the famous question, "What's the best pill?" They all look bewildered at the "I don't know the best pill for you" answer. One boy approaches the table and says something in a cross voice. Matser answers him civilly but laughs after he leaves. "He was not happy because I told him it was a good pill and he said it didn't work. I told him nothing works if you take ten of them!"

At 3.30 am Stichting pack up their table and leave. Over 3,000 people have attended the rave and there has been no trouble. Over 350 of them used the Safe House service. We have a two hour drive back to Amsterdam which makes it a 14 hour day for them. And they've got to be in the office on Monday. Matser changes from Mr Serious to Mr Jubilant on the way home. He's glad it's over. He's glad his weekend is finally beginning. But he's glad to do it. He says people often pat them on the back and say, "It's good work you do!" It is.



One week's selection of ecstasy tablets, in for testing at Jelinek. The agency tests 30-50 pills a week with 70% of them coming from small-time dealers. Photo: Jack Aarts

THE GOVERNMENT Why the Dutch authorities allow ecstasy testing

ECSTASY was first classed as a Class 1 (hard) drug in The Netherlands under the Opium Act because of political, not health reasons. The man responsible for the policy is Tom Cramer from the Ministry Of Health.

"There was little evidence that ecstasy was any public health threat," he says. "But there was evidence that there were plans for the large scale export to other countries, amongst them the UK. This presented an undesirable political situation. Ecstasy was therefore classed as a hard drug although in practice, it was treated as a soft drug and no energy was devoted to the detecting and prosecuting it."

However in 1994, after six deaths at house parties were attributed (although never conclusively linked) to E, the Dutch Parliament debated tougher measures. What

resulted was the Harm Reduction policy. This means the Dutch Government would prefer people not to take ecstasy because of the risks and tries to prevent people from taking it (this is called Primary Prevention). But the policy also tries to reduce the health and social risks for young people who want to go on with ecstasy use (this is called Secondary Prevention).

"Testing is the only available instrument to give the consumer some idea of the risks they are taking considering the market is so polluted. We approved of it with some conditions and intend to scientifically evaluate this method soon and make a final decision whether to go on."

THE PRODUCERS Who manufacturers ecstasy - and why?

HANS Verbraeck is a criminologist at the University Of Amsterdam. A recent project was a book on the dynamics between drug traders and drug enforcement agencies. For his book he interviewed two small producers (defined as producing a couple of kilos a set up) and a big producer (defined as producing kilos in the double figures per set-up). The set-up is the laboratory used to manufacture the ecstasy which is usually dismantled after one production job. The chances of detection are too high to keep it going - the process produces a highly unpleasant smell, something akin to cat piss, and uses a lot of energy which can easily be detected by satellite.

"The small producers, I call them missionaries," explains Verbraeck. "The first pills came in from the States and there was a big factory in Germany and one in Spain. At one moment in time it was quite hard to get real ecstasy."

These 'missionaries' then started producing in order to supply real MDMA to their friends. Money was not their motive. It costs about £15,000 to set up a laboratory and the ideal yield is to get about 50-60% pure MDMA from the raw materials. The first set-up might yield only 10%. One of the small time producers Verbraeck interviewed started in 1989 and wasn't ready for commercial production until spring 1992. But once ready, a kilo of pure MDMA can yield £30,000 profit.

Verbraeck says this kind of producer can be described as ideological as they used the stuff themselves and wanted to supply their friends. There are also two ways to make ecstasy - one is using an organic base called Saffrol which produces a mellower MDMA and the other using an inorganic base called PMK. The small timers used the organic method. "But," he says, "for a couple of years they were definitely big spenders." One is still in production, the other stopped because the expanding market brought people who were only in it for the money and this producer didn't want to deal with the increasing criminal element.

The bit time producer was different. He had labs scattered all over Europe and a home in Ibiza. "He was one of the guys in the original base in Northern Spain," Verbraeck remembers. "After two set-ups they had money for the rest of their lives." This producer is now planning an even bigger job, enough to really set himself up for the rest of his life.

THERE is plenty of money involved for the makers, whether they are missionaries or not. And there are plenty of takers judging by recent surveys which put the number of Dutch people who have ever tried E at between 100,000 and half a million. But it is Herman-Louis Matser who best sums up the attitude of the Dutch towards Ecstasy. Speaking of Stichting's mobile testing at raves he says: "It makes no one take a pill and it makes some people not take a pill."