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Illicit drugs easily bought on the dark web sent via the post to users across Australia

Aussies are adopting a sneaky new tactic to get drugs delivered straight to their homes. But, be warned. The authorities are onto it.

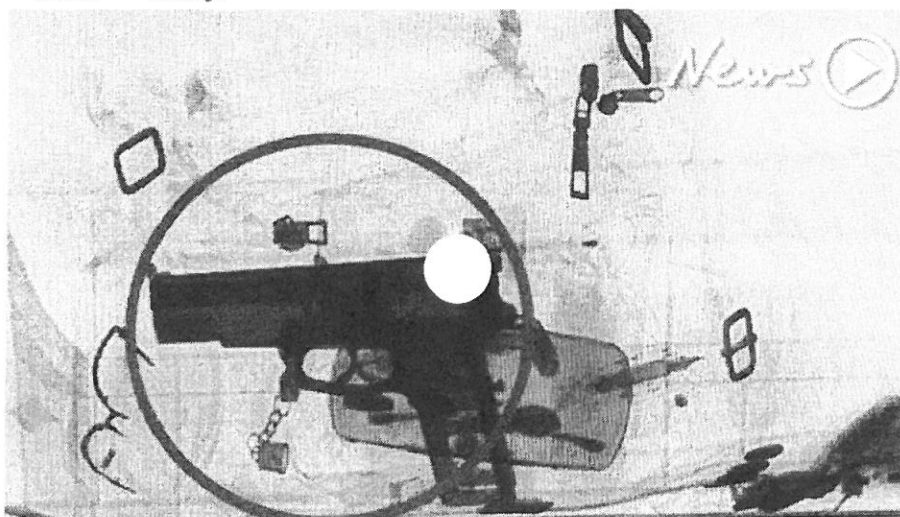


Shannon Molloy

SEPTEMBER 19, 2019 1:15PM

Video

Image



Despite dying 18 years ago, Australian cricket legend Sir Donald Bradman is apparently alive and well, living in a flat in the outer suburbs of a major city.

And it seems The Don, regarded as the greatest batsman of all time, has a bit of a penchant for the illicit drug MDMA.

Or at least, the person who borrowed his name when buying the party drug from a store on the dark web does.

An innocent-looking white envelope passing through the international mail centre in Sydney's western suburbs carried Bradman's name on it.

Inside was a vacuum-sealed package of high-purity, crystallised Methylenedioxymethamphetamine and despite being a relatively small quantity in the scheme of things, its value was in the thousands of dollars.

Detections of small quantity substances are rising, as Aussie drug users continue to flock to online black marketplaces where all kinds of items are easily bought and sent via post.

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MDMA bought on the dark web and sent to Australia in the post. *Source: Supplied*



Large quantities are also regularly detected and seized. *Source: Supplied*

With the Bradman letter, the unusual name wasn't what raised the suspicion of Australian Border Force officers, although they've seen some doozies recently, from current cricketer Steve Smith to Elvis, Julia Gillard and Batman.

There was something else about the look of the letter — one of about 225,000 to roll down conveyor belts that day alone — that saw it picked out by an eagle-eyed inspector.

"The dark web has changed the complexities around what we do but for years now we've been honing our skills, including officers being able to identify by look and feel," Border Force supervisor Neil Singh said.

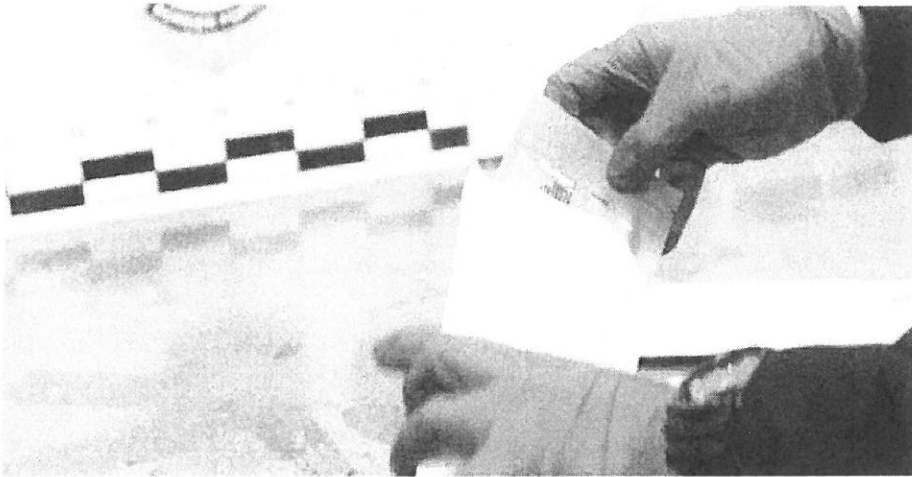
The Sydney facility, which receives about 80 per cent of the country's mail sent from abroad, processes 400,000 letters and parcels daily and every single piece is scrutinised in some way, from X-raying scanning and manual inspection to sniffer dogs.

DAILY DRUG DETECTIONS

On the day news.com.au toured the centre, 10 letters were picked out and inspected in the space of an hour — and each was found to contain drugs.

"Most of the dark web mail comes in via letters," Mr Singh explained.

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One of the seized letters that was found to contain drugs. Source:Supplied

If a Border Force officer suspects an item contains drugs, it's sent to a special room where inspectors donning protective suits and airflow masks take a closer look.

"Here's one we found earlier today," Mr Singh said as he pointed out a hand-addressed envelope.

"It's a standard envelope with a normal address. Inside is a whole stack of paper to give it depth and then in the middle is the MDMA."

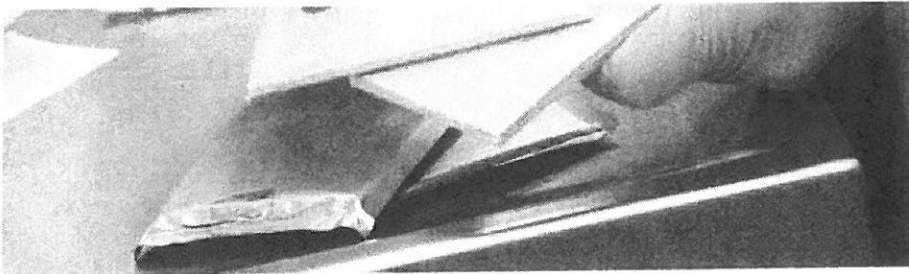
Other letters detected that morning contained cannabinoid products, produced and sold legally in countries such as Canada and in certain US states such as Washington and Colorado, but imported illegally.

"This is just a standard morning. We'll continue to find more all day long," he said, adding that each case was passed on to the Federal Police.



Australian Border Force officers check mail from overseas for illegal substances. Picture: Damian Shaw Source:News Corp Australia

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All kinds of drugs bought from the dark web are detected in letters and parcels. This one contained ecstasy. Picture: Hamish Blair Source: News Corp Australia

Virtually every other kind of drug is found at the centre, from illicit substances such as cocaine to potent, controlled pharmaceuticals such as fentanyl.

“It’s almost seasonal,” Mr Singh said. “When it’s summer and there lots of music festivals on, there’s an increase in MDMA. Believe it or not, Christmas is our busiest time.

“Things like cannabis are year-round. We’re seeing a lot of cocaine lately. It varies.”

If officials make a large seizure — such as the discovery last month of 750kg of ice in putrid, rotting cowhides in a shipping container — there’s usually a flow-on effect.

Border Force officials know that on the back of that, there will likely be an increase in attempts to import drugs in the mail.

DARK WEB CHANGING TACTICS

Sellers on the dark web tend to operate in a similar fashion to legal and above board e-commerce retailers.

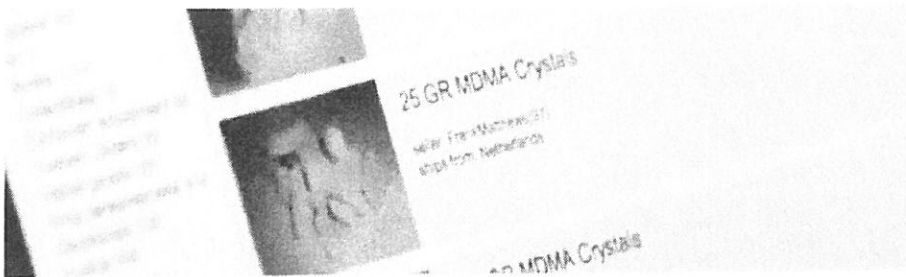
They have slick-looking sites, contained on marketplaces on a part of the internet not indexed by search engines and usually accessed via anonymous and encrypted authorisation, selling all kinds of items.

You can buy personal quantities of cocaine, ecstasy, marijuana or MDMA, performance-enhancing drugs like steroids and controlled opioids like fentanyl.

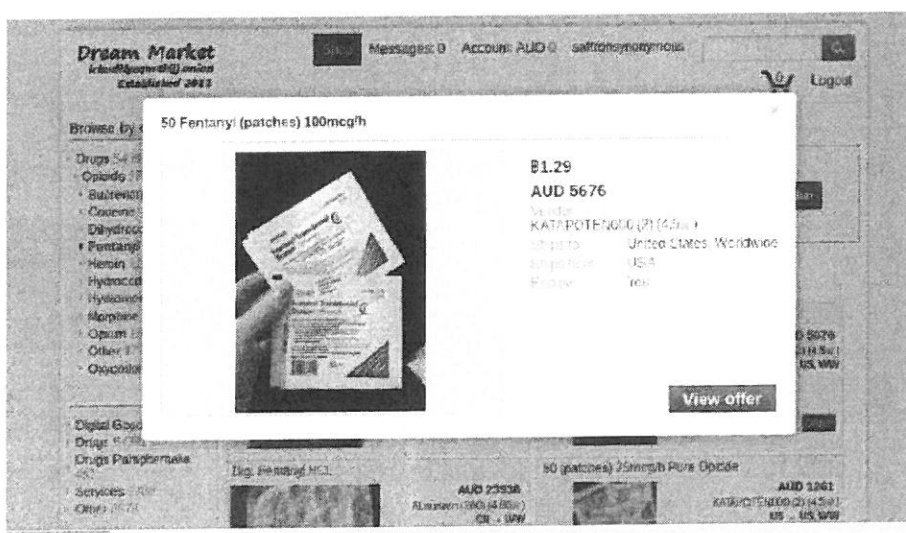
“The dark web stuff has increased the amount of small quantity items coming through. It’s opened up for everyone,” Mr Singh said.

“Previously, people would import (large quantities) and distribute within communities. People now have the option of staying in their own homes and buying individual (quantities) for themselves.”

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Vendors on the dark web sell virtually every kind of illicit drug. Picture: Motherboard. Source: Supplied



Authorities are increasingly concerned by the availability of the highly potent fentanyl on the dark web. Source: Supplied

Some sellers mimic legit retailers to the extent they seize substances that are found to contain invoices. Some “products” are branded in specially designed packaging.

Vendors encourage user ratings, similar to marketplaces like eBay, and some even offer returns policies if buyers aren’t satisfied.

“It’s almost like an online shop for illegal items,” Mr Singh said.

“It’s rarely concealed. It’s kind of taken away the chance for us to have some fun by pulling apart a teddy bear with MDMA hidden inside. A lot of it is just in an envelope.”

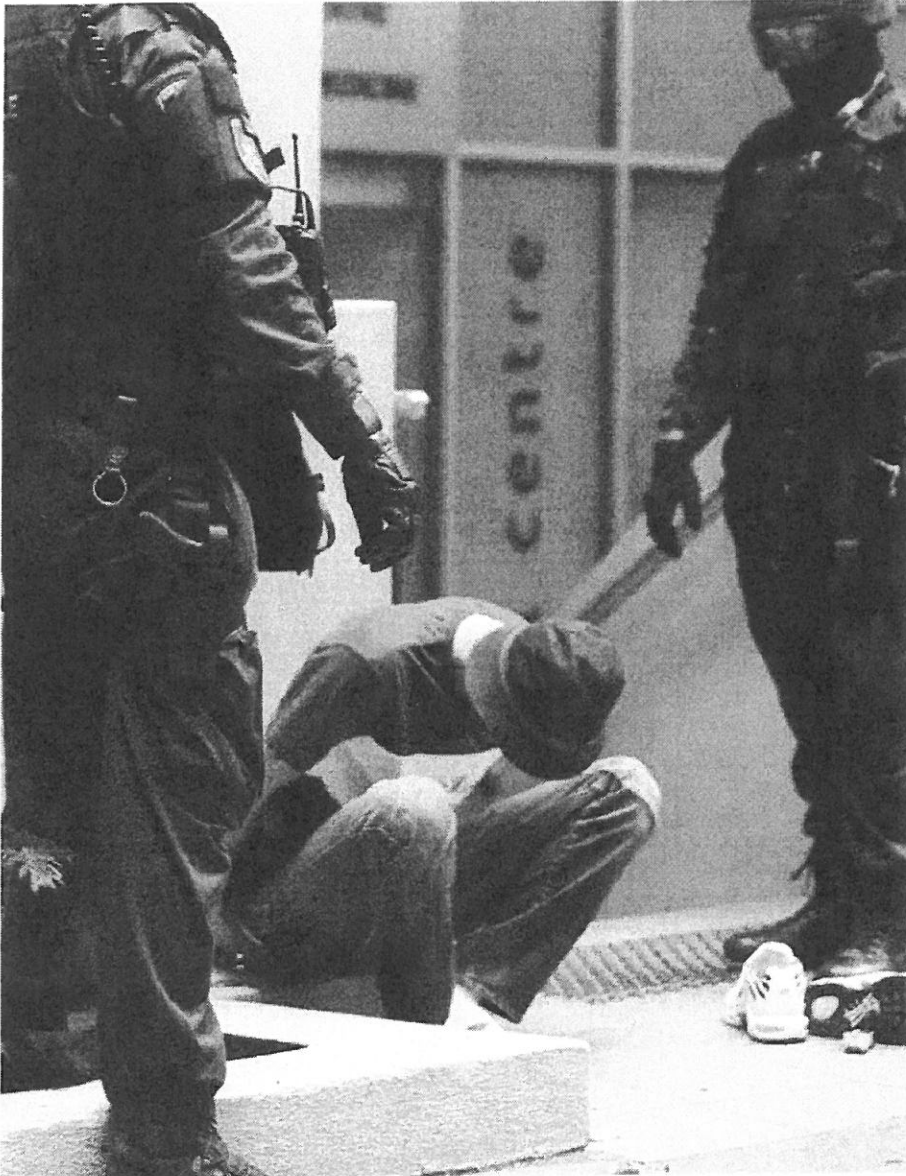
Dark web usage is extremely high in Australia — we rank second in the world behind the Netherlands when it comes to activity.

Detections of drugs mailed to Australia have risen each year, due to a combination of Border Force officers getting better at detecting items, as well as an increase in the volume of drugs being imported.

“Every day, we find narcotics,” Mr Singh said. “I would say (to those considering buying), don’t be silly. You will get caught. We will find those items and even if your real name isn’t on the item, we have many other ways of tracking you down.”

Although, he admits some imported substances will inevitably slip through.

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Dark web buyers are routinely charged. This man was one of 21 allegedly running an illegal drugstore on the dark web. *Source:Supplied*

Federal Assistant Customs Minister Jason Wood said the skill of Border Force officers was incredible to see in action.

And while news.com.au was shown a number of detection methods, Mr Wood said there were technologies in use that weren't disclosed to the public.

"I can't go into specifics obviously but some of the detection technologies that are available are very advanced and make it easier to find prohibited substances," he said.

"I'm working closely with Border Force to get the next phase of what we can do."

The dark web has forced authorities to work harder to be one step ahead of criminals, he said. It has also seen intelligence efforts expanded.

"Law enforcement in Australia works closely with international agencies," Mr Wood said.

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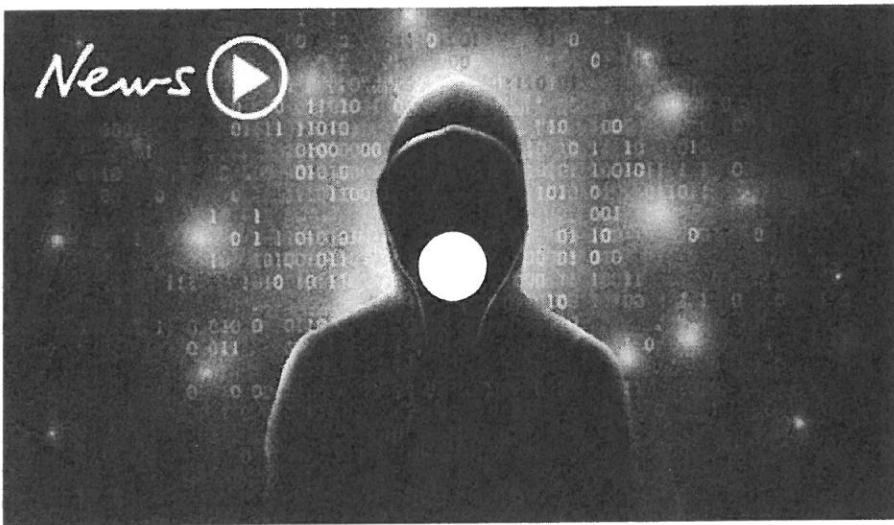
A few weeks later, a second package was allegedly intercepted by Border Force, this time containing fentanyl.

Within weeks, a raid was executed at a home and the woman was arrested and charged with a number of drug importation and possession offences.

Earlier this year, a Darwin man was sentenced to 18 months behind bars for buying large quantities of MDMA from the dark web.

And a South Australian man was charged in July with allegedly importing fentanyl that was purchased from an online black market vendor.

RELATED: Dark web drug dealer Douglas William Barrett jailed for at least two years over fentanyl stash



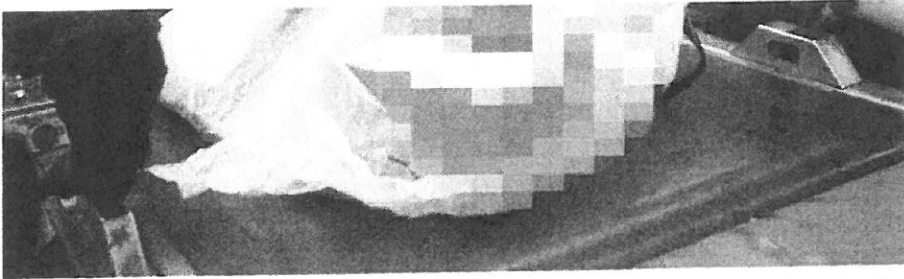
WEAPONS, CIGGIES, TURTLES

How a day in the mail centre pans out is approached every morning, Mr Singh explained.

“We look at the type of mail and where it has originated, examine intelligence we might have and then decide how to handle the items,” he said.

While drugs make up a large chunk of seizures — there were 37,000 detections of illicit substances last year at this centre — the work of Border Force is broader than that.

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The international mail centre in Sydney processes around 400,000 items each day. Among this lot, Border Force found knuckle dusters — a prohibited item. *Source: Supplied*

While demonstrating to news.com.au the X-ray scanning of larger mail items like parcels and boxes, officers find a pair of knuckle dusters hidden in a gift box.

“They’ll send it up the belt chain and it’ll be examined on a second line,” he said.

“A big volume of what we detect are prohibited imports of weapons. Knuckle dusters come through a lot. Knives, nunchucks, switch knives — they’re pretty common.

“Something we’ve seen a lot recently are these things called dart projectiles — it’s a pretty innocent-looking box with darts inside where you push a button and it shoots it. It can pierce through a box from 10m away. Imagine that out in the community.

“A big part of the job is staying on top of trends so we know what’s popular and can look for it. When fidget spinners were popular, we had people trying to disguise throwing stars as fidget spinners.”



Australian Border Force also uses dogs to detect illegal items. *Source: Supplied*

Firearms are also found — both assembled guns and separate components that pose a risk to the community.

“With the guns, what we find a bit of are add-ons that are illegal in Australia like conversion kits to make a weapon automatic or semiautomatic, or silencers, that sort of thing,” Mr Singh said.

“It’s not a gun on an x-ray — it’s a piece that might not look like much, but we know what to look for.”

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“We’ve unscrewed a speaker that looked suspicious and opened it up expecting narcotics to be hidden inside, but a turtle crawled out. Sometimes it’s a bit of a surprise.”



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