Dangerous hash-oil blasts are increasing concern

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In markets with more relaxed pot laws, new threat looms

The responding officer said he smelled the distinctive odor of burning flesh when he made contact with three people outside an Avondale home in early May. All three had singed hair and blistered skin peeling from either their arms or faces, police wrote.

It's the type of scene emergency crews typically encounter when saving people from a house fire, or responding to a natural-gas explosion, but police and firefighters soon learned they had come upon a new sensation in the Valley that has caused alarm among first responders in markets with more relaxed marijuana laws.

Two of the three people in the Avondale residential garage near Dysart and Buckeye roads were trying to make butane hash oil, which is a highly potent form of cannabis concentrate, records show, and the experiment nearly turned deadly when a woman walked into the highly flammable environment intending to smoke a cigarette.

The explosion was at least the second incident so far this year in which Valley authorities suspected hash oil played a role. In January, Tempe emergency crews responded to a reported vehicle explosion at a convenience store near Southern Avenue and Priest Drive. Investigators had said they believed the explosion was caused by hash oil from marijuana.

Tempe police later found 26-year-old Bradley Brennan at a local hospital where he was treated for injuries sustained when hazardous materials, drugs and paraphernalia used to manufacture hash oil ignited and caused the explosion, according to Tempe police spokeswoman Molly Enright. Charges submitted against Brennan are still under review by the county attorney.

Hash oil is produced by using a solvent to extract cannabinoids from marijuana plants, but has no resemblance to the resinous material, hashish, according to the United States Drug Enforcement Administration. The liquid's color and smell vary depending on what solvent is used, and a drop or two can have the same effect as a marijuana cigarette.

To make butane hash oil, the highly flammable substance is forced through an extraction tube containing finely ground marijuana, according to federal drug agencies. The process can produce abstracts known as dab, wax, shatter or earwax, and as much as 90 percent of those products are Tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, the main active chemical in marijuana.

"Cheech and Chong couldn't have come up with this in their wildest dreams," Kevin Sabet, president and co-founder of of Smart Approaches to Marijuana, said about hash oil.
Water, carbon dioxide, butane, ethanol and isopropyl alcohol are solvents that can be used to extract hash oil from marijuana, according to Phoenix fire officials.

"They put the marijuana leaves in the butane and heat it up," Phoenix Fire Inspector Brian Scholl said. "Then you get more vapors and the vapors find an ignition source like an electrical outlet or somebody smoking and that is how we get the explosion."

Glenn Gould, 35, and the other man had been in the Avondale home's enclosed garage using butane to make hash oil, a process they had gleaned from watching a YouTube video, Avondale police records show. The explosion happened when Margaret Sanidad, 32, entered the garage to smoke a cigarette at about 1:30 a.m. on May 4.

The ensuing blast blew off the garage door, which was found on the sidewalk in front of the house. None of the other five people inside the home — including four children — were injured.

Butane can be used to make hash oil safely, if it's done in a ventilated area by professionals using the right equipment, according to Jon Gettel, director of AZ 4 NORML, the southern Arizona chapter of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws.

"The problem is we have these young people or inexperienced people who want to do this and they don't think about ignition sources," he said.

First responders transported Gould, Sanidad and the other man to the Arizona Burn Center at Maricopa Medical Center, where they were treated for severe, but non-life-threatening, injuries.

In 2010, Arizona voters approved legalizing medical marijuana and efforts are underway to get a legalization proposition on the 2016 ballot.

Hash oil can be ingested orally, applied topically or inhaled using a vaporizer pen, said Gettel, also an employee at a Tucson dispensary. That can be better for medical-marijuana patients needing regular dosage because smoking marijuana can irritate the lungs and cause bronchitis.

Gould and the other man told police they did not have medical-marijuana cards, records show.

Scholl said the Fire Department does not know any Phoenix medical-marijuana dispensaries using butane to produce hash oil, but to do it legally, they go through a permit process and pass inspection.

The volatile process has caught the attention of public-safety officials in states with relaxed marijuana laws, including Colorado, where recreational marijuana use became legal this year. Colorado had 26 confirmed THC extraction lab explosions and 27 reported injuries during the first half of 2014, compared with 12 explosions and 18 injuries for all of 2013, according to the Rocky Mountain High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area.
But those numbers could be higher as the ones reported account only for the incidents confirmed by the agency. The Associated Press reported in May that Colorado firefighters had dashed to at least 31 butane hash oil explosions this year.

Colorado's increase in hash oil explosions as well as the Avondale incident are evidence that recreational marijuana should remain illegal in Arizona, according to Carolyn Short of Keep AZ Drug Free, an organization that fought against legalizing medical marijuana.

"Drug dealers are creating toxic waste dumps just like the crystal meth labs of yesteryear that we worked to get rid of," Short said about manufacturing hash oil.

Using a search warrant, investigators found marijuana and drug paraphernalia inside the Avondale home, records show.

The four children—ages 5, 8, 9 and 13 at the time of the incident—were turned over to Child Protective Services, records show. Two of the children later tested positive for THC, Avondale police confirmed.

A Maricopa County grand jury indicted Gould in August on four counts of child abuse and two counts of endangerment, records show.

Gould and Sanidad were also charged with marijuana possession and drug paraphernalia but pleaded guilty last month to a reduced charge, according to Maricopa County Superior Court records. The drug-paraphernalia charges were dismissed.