

Heart drug abuse fatal

NEW ORLEANS — The tacky souvenir and T-shirt shops crowded along the honky tonk strip joints and jazz halls of Bourbon Street have added a new item to their inventory — a heart disease medicine touted as the latest pop drug.

Amyl nitrite, used to dilate the blood vessels of heart patients, has become a top-selling commodity in shops that sell marijuana pipes and cocaine spoons as well as tourist souvenirs and T-shirts adorned with the message.

Under the brand names of Rush and Locker Room and Bullet, the substance sells for as much as \$7 for a 30-minute dose.

"It'll give you a little high if you sniff it," said a clerk at the Image makers shop who refused to give his name.

But Orleans Parish Coroner Dr. Frank Minyard said amyl nitrite users believe the substance will enhance sexual pleasure and produce orgasm.

Minyard said he questions the drug's powers as an aphrodisiac, but said users could die sniffing the stuff.

"It can dilate the blood vessels so much, the increased oxygen could cause a cardiac arrhythmia, or an irregular beat of the heart," Minyard said.

He said his department and the parish district attorney's office were investigating the death of a man whose heart stopped while using a substance similar to amyl nitrite.

Minyard said many of the shops advertising amyl nitrite were selling butyl nitrate, a derivative under investigation in at least one death.

The substance can be purchased over-the-counter by heart patients, Minyard said it is dangerous when used without a doctor's supervision.

"It's potentially dangerous, a substance that should not be used indiscriminately," the coroner said.

Shop keepers selling the drug are ignorant about its legal status. "We got the federal regulation against selling it dropped from the

French Quarter," one clerk said. Minyard, newly elected head of the Louisiana Medical Society's Public Health Committee, said he will work this year to outlaw the sale of amyl nitrite and other drug-

related paraphernalia. "Those head shops sell a lot of stuff like that — pipes for marijuana, spoons for cocaine," he said. "There should be some public health laws concerning this."

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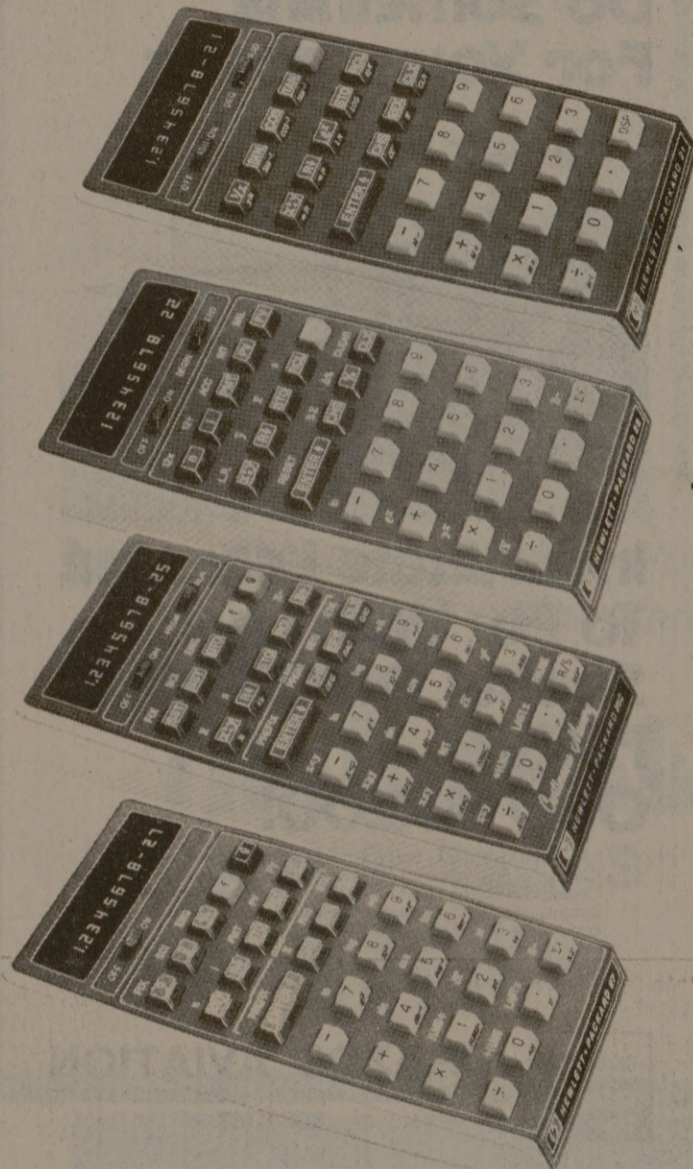
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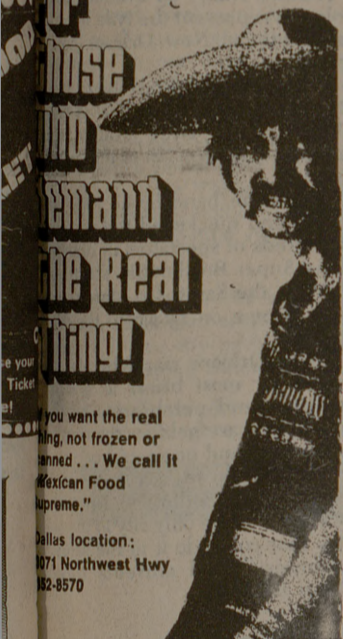
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