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2222 Derby Street  
Berkeley, CA 94705  
510-486-1888  
510-486-1911 Fax  
email:  
[drugshrink@comcast.net](mailto:drugshrink@comcast.net)

*Stephen M. Pittel, PhD*

**Forensic Consultant & Expert Witness**

## **Burundanga - The Next Colombian Drug Threat**

**by Stephen M. Pittel, PhD**

Note: Dr. Pittel is a [Drug & Alcohol Resource](#) host at [Forensic Solutions LLC](#).  
He can be reached for comment or consultation by contacting:  
SMP Associates; 222 Derby Street; Berkeley, CA 94705;  
Phone (510) 486-1888; Fax (510-486-1911); Email: [drugshrink@comcast.net](mailto:drugshrink@comcast.net)

Recent reports of date-rapes, thefts, kidnapping and other crimes in the U.S. and Canada have been attributed to Burundanga - a potent form of scopolamine that has been used for decades in Columbia in native rituals, as a weapon and by criminals who prey on tourists. The Wall Street Journal reported in 1995 that the use of Burandanga was increasing rapidly as the favored method of assault by immigrant Columbian criminal gangs in the U.S. who now also use it as a major form of currency.

A State Department Consular Warning issued last month warns tourists to avoid unnecessary travel to Columbia because of terrorist activities in general - and particularly to Bogata and Cali where Burundanga is given to unsuspecting visitors in chewing gum, chocolate, drinks or dusted on pieces of paper. Even small doses of the drug are reported to cause "submissive" behavior, while larger doses apparently cause almost instantaneous unconsciousness, followed by complete anterograde amnesia.

A 1991 article "Scopolamine intoxication as a model of transient global amnesia" by A. Ardila and C. Moreno describes Burundanga as an extract of the Borrachio ("drunken") tree and other plants belonging to the Daturu or Brugsmannia genus. Hollister classified Datura and related plants as hallucinogens in his classic volume on "Chemical Psychoses" but it is

probably more accurate to view these drugs as sedative-hypnotics on the basis of their powerful hypnotic and amnesic effects.

*Until a few years ago San Francisco and other Bay Area prostitutes used scopolamine to drug and rob their clients. I suspect that I haven't heard much about its illicit use recently because its availability has declined as other drugs have displaced its legitimate medical uses for treatment of motion sickness and sedation. Since Burundanga already accounts for more than half of Bogata's emergency room admissions for poisoning and over 500 reported crimes per month, it shouldn't be long before it rolls off our tongues as easily as "roofies" or GHB.*

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