

Students left fighting for lives after taking enough caffeine for 300 cups of coffee in botched university experiment

Northumbria University

Henry Bodkin

25 JANUARY 2017 • 9:38PM

Source URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/25/university-fined-400k-students-taking-part-caffeine-experiment/>

Two students were nearly killed after they were given enough caffeine for 300 cups of coffee during a botched science experiment.

Northumbria University has been fined £400,000 for the incident in March 2015 which caused Alex Rossetto and Luke Parkin to be rushed to hospital and put on dialysis.

On Wednesday a judge said the two sports science students probably only survived because they were fit and active young men.

The pair had volunteered to take part in a test aiming to measure the effect of caffeine on exercise, but a basic calculation error meant the second-year students were given 100 times the correct dosage.

Prosecutor Adam Farrer told Newcastle Crown Court that the pair should have been given 0.3g of caffeine in the orange juice mix, but were in fact given 30g.

There is 0.1g in the average cup of coffee.

Newcastle Crown Court heard the calculation had been done on a mobile phone, the decimal point being put in the wrong place and there being no risk assessment for the test.

Mr Farrer said death has previously been reported after consumption of just 18g and the students were left in a "life-threatening condition".

The university, which has more than 30,000 students and a budget of almost £250 million, had switched from using caffeine tablets to powder, which, he said, meant supervision was vital.

But he said: "The staff were not experienced or competent enough and they had never done it on their own before. "The university took no steps to make sure the staff knew how to do it."

The court was told about a catalogue of errors that led to the overdose, which Mr Farrer said "could easily have been fatal".

Mr Rossetto, who has gone on to study a Masters degree at the university, was kept in hospital for six days, reported short-term memory loss and lost 26.5lb (12kg) in weight.

Mr Parkin was treated for two days in intensive care and lost 22lb (10kg) in weight.



The amount of caffeine they should have been given (Right: 0.3g) and the amount they were actually given (Left: 30g)

CREDIT: HEALTH AND SAFETY EXECUTIVE (UK)

Both men have since made a full physical recovery but are also proceeding with their own civil claims.

Judge Edward Bindloss said: "The risk here was death.

"It should have been a high priority, a risk assessment should have been carried out and appropriately put into place and appropriate training to reduce the foreseeable risk.

"The test was perfectly proper, the error was in the calculation of the amount of caffeine."

He said: "Both were sportsmen and fit young men. Luckily for them and for everyone they were in the sort of shape that was able to deal with this large amount of caffeine."

A spokesman for the Health and Safety Executive, which brought the prosecution, said it was "happy" with the fine, and hoped it "sent a message" to similar organisations conducting experiments on humans.

Peter Smith, defending, said vice chancellor Andrew Wathey was in court, along with other members of staff, as the human face of the university.

"They are deeply sorry for the breach in this case," he said.

"The university community is a close one and they wish to emphasize that they take the welfare of their students and staff seriously."

A statement from the university said: "The university is genuinely sorry for what happened in this case. This was an isolated incident. We reacted promptly to what took place.