

Whatever Happened to Dutch Needle Spiking?

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In the spring of 2022, stories about “needle spiking” started circulating in the Netherlands. The stories represented that, at some point during a night out, several people – young women in particular – had been pricked and drugged with hypodermic needles. Evidence suggesting that this was really happening on a large scale is extremely scarce: surveillance camera footage and drug tests turned up nothing, and the police did not make any arrests.¹ With one exception: in July of that year, a 31-year-old man from Georgia (Eastern Europe) without a fixed place of residence was sentenced to five months in prison for needle spiking at a dance festival in The Hague.² The man, a drug addict denying the act, was accused of stabbing a woman in the leg with a syringe. The victim had been oblivious to the fact, but bystanders had seen it happen. The alleged incident took place more than a month after the stories about needle spiking had started to circulate, and this case appears to be a form of *ostension*: a phenomenon involving viral stories that may ultimately inspire certain behaviors, actions, or perceptions.³ There are two forms of ostension possibly at work here:

1. The perpetrator indeed pricked the victim with a syringe: the already existing stories may have inspired him.
2. The perpetrator owned a syringe but did not prick anyone: the bystanders only saw him with the needle and, on the basis of already circulating stories, concluded that this must be a case of needle spiking.

Ostension

A classic case of ostension described by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi involves a murder during Halloween in the US (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983; see also Champion-Vincent 2022: 87). As is customary in folklore, this celebration featured the usual horror stories going around. One of these stories was about poisoned candy: children were allegedly given poisoned candy by a stranger while trick-or-treating

and died after consuming it. This horror story, which had been circulating for some time, inspired Ronald Clark O'Bryan to do the following in 1974: after taking out life insurance policies on his son and daughter, he himself gave them candy laced with cyanide during Halloween, hoping to see some unknown perpetrator blamed for his crime. Son Timothy ate the candy and died, daughter Elizabeth held on to the candy and survived. The intent of Ronald O'Bryan (who was soon dubbed The Candy Man) came to light after an investigation by the police and the judiciary, and eventually led to him receiving the death sentence.

When such stories surface, we tend to think they stick to the following procedure: (a) something happens, and (b) stories are created about it. With *ostension*, however, the exact opposite is the case: stories that were already circulating will subsequently inspire people to display certain behaviors.⁴ This happens more often than we think. Our heads are full of stories, and we act according to them: don't walk under a ladder; be careful on Friday the thirteenth; watch out if a black cat crosses your path; expect good luck if you find a four-leaf clover; knock on unprocessed wood; the spirit of Charlie Charlie can be summoned with two pencils; and be afraid of horror clowns on Halloween.

Needle Spiking

Back to the story of needle spiking, which went viral in the Low Countries in the spring of 2022. Overall the story goes like this: while going out, usually at a party or festival, someone begins to feel unwell. In most cases, this happens to young women. Sometimes the victims actually feel being punctured, in other cases no puncture mark is found on the body until the next day. The assumption is that perpetrators carrying hypodermic needles are going about pricking people in order to drug them. This could explain the symptoms of feeling unwell, such as fainting, slurred speech, sensory loss, inability to walk, and a general state of confusion. However, these stories contain some problematic elements that deserve closer examination.

Where and who are the perpetrators?

Needle spiking was reported in the media primarily in Venlo, Kaatsheuvel, Doetinchem, Amsterdam, Alkmaar, Borger, Heerenveen, Groningen, and The Hague, as well as in Flanders (Mechelen and Hasselt).⁵ As mentioned above, a junkie was arrested and convicted in The Hague, but he can hardly be held responsible for all the incidents. Quite rightly, the police took all reports seriously, but investigations did not lead to the arrests of perpetrators anywhere else. No suspects were seen on security cameras. Neither victims nor bystanders

observed perpetrators. Is there an injection gang roaming around? That sounds quite unlikely.

What are the motives of the perpetrators?

What the police do know is that drugging is usually followed by a subsequent offense, often a sexual one, where women are drugged and then sexually abused. The most famous case in point is that of Bill Cosby, who was convicted of repeated drugging and rape.⁶ His method was “drink spiking”: incapacitating women by drugging their drinks for the purpose of sexually abusing them.

In almost all Dutch needle spiking cases, there is no follow-up offense, and only one claim of robbery (Soudagar and Van der Beek 2022). So far, no one has reported any immoral acts or deeds. Apparently, the “needle spiking” perpetrators usually have no other goal in mind than to prick people with a needle or syringe for the sheer fun of it, just to see what happens next.⁷ Another motive could be robbery (see above). The lone Georgian perpetrator who got caught did not commit a follow-up crime.

The alleged victims simply return home, and in some cases they only find a puncture mark, abrasion or a bruise later on. Their interpretation on the basis of an already viral tale about needle spiking is again a form of ostension. But one plus one does not always equal two. Feeling unwell while going out and finding a small wound on your body are not necessarily related. It is merely the pre-existing story that establishes a causal connection, a story that many people have in mind, and that leads them to connect two separate facts.

In 1954, it was rumored on the American West Coast that tiny pits in car windshields were the result of fallout from nuclear tests. More and more people subjected their windscreens to a closer inspection, and found that there were indeed small holes in them: fallout from a hydrogen bomb that had exploded shortly before on the Bikini Atoll! If they had looked just as carefully at their car windows before the nuclear test, they would have seen the same holes, which had been caused by small stones on the highway (Burger 2006: 26–28). One plus one does not always equal two.

What happened to the victims?

No sex crimes for sure. All victims did, however, become unwell in some way or another: they blacked out for a shorter or longer period of time, fainted, suffered temporary loss of hearing, sight, speech, or the ability to stand up or walk straight; some fell short of breath, or experienced dizziness or nausea (with the occasional urge to actually vomit). Some of the victims were male, but in most cases they were

young women of around twenty years of age. Toxicology tests did not show any traces of drugs (albeit that the tests may have been carried out too late to reveal substances that wear off quickly).

Cases of needle spiking are most commonly found in places where many people are gathered, which brings us to the following:

Where did the incidents take place?

On busy stands, during parties and festivals, and in often crowded catering establishments. Let us establish that needle spiking does not occur when drinking a bottle of water in the park, while having coffee during the intermission of a classical concert, or when sipping a cup of tea at an outdoor café. Victims predominantly become unwell in places where (a lot of) alcohol is served. All the symptoms of becoming unwell, from nausea and loss of balance to blackouts, fit perfectly into the pattern of (excessive) alcohol consumption.

Which is not to say that this is always the explanation. During the Hasselt teen festival *We R Young*, no fewer than 22 girls became unwell due to alleged “needle spiking”, and in this case it is safe to assume that the children were not drunk (Wollants and Mariott 2022). Consequently, blood and urine tests showed nothing: no alcohol, drugs, medicines, or any other toxic substances (Schoofs 2022). At the first-aid station, one main cause was found: hyperventilation.⁸ In other words, after one or two girls at the festival had begun to feel unwell, the rumor of needle spiking gave rise to a lot of nervous and anxious tension, which then caused many girls to start hyperventilating. This phenomenon could be medically classified as “mass psychogenic illness” (MPI), formerly known as “mass hysteria”.

How is this injecting done?

Let us assume for a moment that there are in fact perpetrators walking around with filled hypodermic needles with the intent to drug people. How exactly does this work?

The shot itself, to begin with. It is far from easy to effectively inject through clothing. Not surprisingly, no perpetrator has ever asked a victim to roll up her sleeve. Quite a few victims said they did not feel the prick at all, and only found a puncture mark on her body the next day (ostension once more).

It is kind of a fantasy to think that an injection could be administered unnoticed—perhaps some imagine something like the hypospray from *Star Trek* (*pssshhh*). Anyone who has had COVID injections or has ever received an anesthetic in the dental chair will know from experience that the injection is actually felt, that injecting substances take several seconds, and that you are supposed to sit still. Anyone who

unexpectedly feels an injection needle going into their body at a catering establishment will reflexively jump away and turn around to see what is happening. And given the fact that injecting a substance takes some time—in fat tissue or muscle; injecting it into a vein without someone noticing is completely out of the question—bystanders must also see what is going on. In the stories, the perpetrator almost always remains invisible, though.

Piercing through clothing requires a thin needle. This would exclude, for example, the injection of GHB, an effective drug that often pops up in “drink spiking” scenarios. GHB is a thick substance that requires a thick needle, so the injection could not go unfelt. Experts have been wondering which liquid (designer) drug might be suitable for ‘needle spiking’, but they have not come up with an answer yet.

Could this happen in so many places almost simultaneously?

That is very unlikely. Rather than evidence of a viral crime, the needle spiking rumors are evidence of a viral story — and of a latent fear or moral panic. From mouth to mouth and via social media, newspapers and television, the story spreads unchecked and (inevitably) instills fear in people. Such is the power of a successful horror story. But there is no such thing as an injection gang producing victims all over the Netherlands.

By 2003 the story about the Smiley Gang had reached the Netherlands. Everywhere and nowhere, immigrant boys were allegedly harassing girls at nighttime, cutting the corners of their mouths. Like in the needle spiking case, the police dutifully investigated, but found neither victims nor perpetrators (Burger 2009).

In 2016 and 2018, scary killer clowns or horror clowns were sighted all over the place.⁹ And yet again: no victims, no perpetrators. With one exception: a man from Rotterdam felt inspired by the rumor and started walking around dressed like a clown, carrying a large knife—there’s ostension again (De Vries 2016). He was arrested by the police.

In the summer of 2005, media reports and rumors led the entire country to believe that there was a puma roaming around on the Veluwe.¹⁰ The hunt was on, but it turned out to be a big fat cat called Max. Exit Winnie de Poema.

Around the turn of the century, there was a persistent rumor that Muslim shawarma restaurant owners masturbated in their garlic sauce in numerous places in the Netherlands out of contempt for their Dutch customers.¹¹ Health Inspection never revealed a single case.

Stories tend to circulate because they touch an open nerve in some way – whether it be about Muslims, Moroccan youths, dangerous exotic

species, or a horror movie being re-released (It). Or to warn about the dangers of nightlife.

What course did the story take?

The course the story took to reach us has a pattern. This must be regarded as circumstantial evidence, but it needs to be mentioned all the same. The story about needle spiking is quite clearly a successor of the long-standing story about drink spiking (Campion-Vincent 2022:86). In this story, women are told to be aware of drugs being put into their drinks without their knowledge or consent—in other words: Bill Cosby’s method. The rumor started in the UK, and many hundreds of women have filed reports, mainly because they experienced symptoms of nausea, dizziness, difficulty talking or walking, blackouts... the very same symptoms we find in alleged needle-spiking cases. It has now come to the point that women put beer coasters on top of their glasses to prevent things from being thrown in. When visiting the toilet, they ask a friend to watch their drinks. British catering staff have been instructed to be more alert.

British police and a special investigative team carried out extensive investigations and found no serious, comprehensive evidence of drink spiking or needle spiking (House Affairs Committee 2022). The report from April of that year notes:

No-one knows how prevalent spiking is, whether by drink, drug or needle, and no-one knows what causes perpetrators to do it. Anecdotal evidence suggests the practice is widespread and dangerous, and that many people, particularly young, particularly women, are affected by it and are afraid they will be spiked on evenings out. An absence of accurate data makes it impossible, however, to judge accurately just how widespread, how dangerous spiking is. Policy initiatives to reduce both spiking and the fear of it cannot be well-founded or well-targeted without reliable evidence. (Campion-Vincent 2022:73)

Incidentally, there are plenty of indications for excessive binge drinking, also among women.¹² Such an outcome is not a pleasant message, though. Rather than being told that their own drinking is to blame, people prefer to assume that they are the innocent victims of someone else's evil intent. After all, victims can count on sympathy and pity (Campion-Vincent 2022: 83). As Peter Burger noted in a recent interview: “People use too much alcohol and drugs. They experience unexpected effects that are horrifying and confusing. They have this

really good, ready-made, and very useful story offered to them” (Comiteau 2022).

So the stories about “drink spiking” started in the UK, crossed the Channel, spread from France to Belgium, and then started their triumphal march across the Netherlands. The needle spiking phenomenon followed the same route. The stories could spread like a virus from one community to the next as long as their contents remained viable.

The story of the Smiley Gang also took virtually the same route.¹³ It started in Scotland, where cutting mouth corners was still blamed on football hooligans. The story descended to London, where this criminal method was attributed to, for instance, the IRA. The story then crossed the Channel to France, where it took on a racist streak: the perpetrators were said to be North Africans. The story subsequently arrived in the Walloon Region, and in Brussels, the language probably switched from French to Flemish. The story about the Angelic Smile, as it was called in Flanders, did particularly well in student cities. Thereupon we saw the story spread across the Netherlands in waves, from the province of North Brabant in the south of the country to Groningen in the very north. Again, the course a story takes need not say anything about its nature or veracity, but nonetheless the patterns were very similar.

Are we scared of needles?

Yes, and we have been for well over a century. Most recently, people were afraid of Covid vaccinations and boosters, for various reasons. The fear was due partly to the needle prick and partly to the contents of the syringe, which were said to be sickening or even lethal. At the end of the 20th century, there was a fear of AIDS-infected drug addict syringes, which were lying about everywhere. The needles were found in rubbish bins and on playgrounds, within the reach of children and other people, but according to the stories they could also have been deliberately placed in banisters or cinema seats, with the intention of infecting people on purpose (Campion-Vincent 2022:80).

Folktale researcher Peter Burger devoted two chapters of his dissertation *Monsterlijke Verhalen* (Monstrous Stories, 2014) to the subjects of “Drugged and abused” and “Intoxicated at the cinema” (119-164).¹⁴ He cites even older cases, including from the time of the great fear of the white slave trade, when it was believed that young women were drugged with potions and hypodermic needles to be kidnapped and traded as sex slaves (Campion-Vincent 2022:82). At the time, the underlying message of these stories was that young ladies should stay home safely and not go on any independent, free-spirited adventure.

Needle Spiking as Cautionary Tale in General

The stories about needle spiking in the Netherlands will for the most part fall into the category of fear rumors and moral panic. This does not preclude them from having a function or purpose, though. These essentially untrue stories serve mostly as a distinct warning. The 'needle spiking' scenario metaphorically sketches the potential dangers of nightlife to young women in particular, who must therefore always be on their guard. Dangerous predators could be lurking at all times. To hammer such a moral message home, a provocatively stunning story is needed.

So whatever happened to Dutch needle spiking in the end? The moral panic lasted as long as the spring and part of the summer of 2022, but as soon as ever more news media started to express doubts or even began to debunk the testimonies as contemporary legends, the number of rumors slowly but surely diminished (Figure 1)—as Véronique Campion-Vincent already predicted almost 9 months ago (2022:87). In the meantime, unlike “needle spiking”, Dutch searches for “drink spiking” over the last five years show a lasting concern for this phenomenon in Google Trends (Figures 2 and 3). The slightly more plausible tales about drink spiking keep on circulating and particularly function as a general warning for the dangers of nightlife, especially for young women.

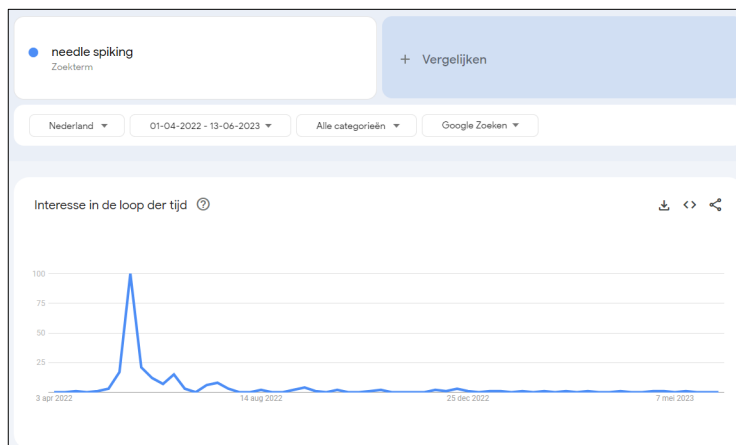


Figure 1. Google Trends: Dutch people searching for “needle spiking” with a peak in May–June 2022.

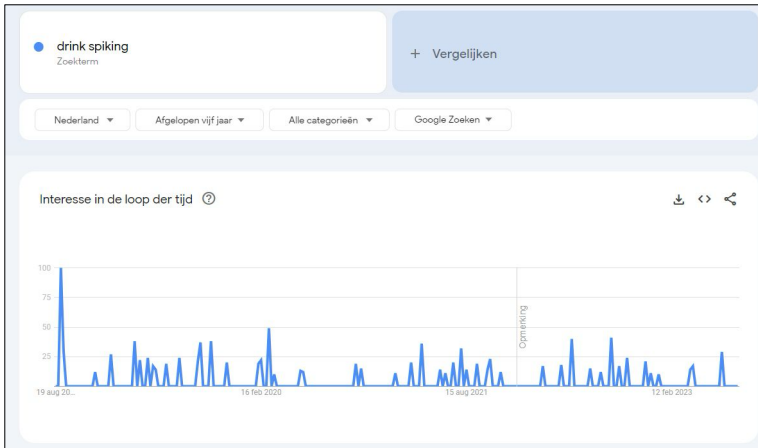


Figure 2. Google Trends: Dutch people searching for ‘Drink Spiking’ in the last 5 years shows an ongoing concern.

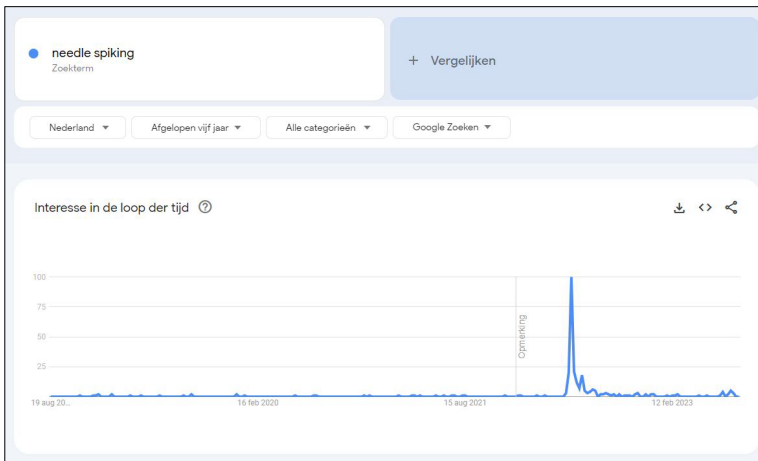


Figure 3. Google Trends: Dutch people searching for ‘Needle Spiking’ in the last 5 years only shows a highly focussed concern in Spring–Summer 2022.

Notes

1. ‘Politie vindt geen bewijs voor “needle spiking”’ 2022.
2. ‘Man krijgt vijf maanden cel voor “needle spiking” op Haags festival’ 2022.

3. Examples in the Dutch Folktale Database:

<https://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=needle+AND+spiking>

4 For cases of needle spiking, ostension and social panic in the UK, France and Walloon Belgium in 2021-2022, see Campion-Vincent 2022.

5 Comiteau 2022 counted some twenty to forty cases in the Netherlands alone; in the UK, 1,300 cases of needle spiking were reported.

6 'Bill Cosby sexual assault cases' 2023.

7 On this possibility, see Campion-Vincent 2023, which she rightfully interprets as another form of ostension.

8. 'Tienerfestival' 2022.

9. Dutch Folktale Database: <https://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=horrorclown>

10. Meder 2007. Dutch Folktale Database: <https://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=poema+AnD+veluwe>.

11. See Meder 2009, pp. 257-258. Dutch Folktale Database:

https://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?facet=49_s%3A%22BRUN+05515%22.

12. In Dutch we have the verb *comazuipen*, which translates as "to drink oneself into a coma."

13. See Burger 2009. Examples in the Dutch Folktale Database:

https://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?facet=49_s%3A%22TM+6053%22.

14. See: <https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2940695/> and <https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2940696/>.

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