

Narcotics—Part III

Odds Heavily Against Drug Addict Being Cured at Treatment Center

By HARRY FERGUSON
Washington—UPI—Curing a person of the drug habit is one of the supreme challenges to medical science. A study of 1,900 persons released after treatment at the Public Health Service Hospital at Lexington, Ky., showed that 90 per cent of them went back on drugs again and usually within six months.

There are two ways in which an addict can get the treatment at Lexington and the other federal hospital at Fort Worth, Tex. If he has been convicted of a federal offense, the judge can order him to take the cure. Or he can enter the hospitals volun-

arily, provided beds are available, and if he is able to pay he is charged \$9.50 a day.

Faces Heavy Odds

Right from the start the odds are heavily against him being cured. More than one-third of the voluntary patients can't take it, and leave within two weeks. The prisoners, of course, are forced to remain. By the end of the first month one-half of the voluntary patients have given up and departed. Fewer than one-third of them stay as long as the doctors consider necessary. Then one out of ten succeeds in freeing himself of drugs.

Treatment consists of a

gradual withdrawal of drugs by giving the patient decreasing doses. Up until 1945 the patients were given injections of morphine. They called this "going to the shooting gallery." Sometime during World War II a synthetic drug called methadone was developed in Germany. It bears only a slight chemical relations to morphine or heroin and is now used in the public health hospitals. Now the patients say they are "going to the cocktail lounge," meaning they are going to drink a small glass of reddish-colored methadone.

For a person lightly addicted the withdrawal period can be over in four days, but the heavy addict needs between 10 and 12 days. Either way, the patient is deathly ill because all methadone does is flatten out the peaks of pain in an attempt to make life endurable.

After complete withdrawal of drugs there is a convalescence period of two weeks. The patient begins to have an appetite and gains strength, but he will be restless and irritable for several months. Then the treatment shifts from the body to the mind. A narcotics addict usually is listless and indifferent to everything except where he is going to get his next shot.

At the Lexington hospital an attempt is made to get him interested in something—soft ball, boxing, watching television, bowling, going to the movies, playing in an orchestra, theatricals, or writing for the hospital newspaper called "The Blue Grass Times." The doctor would like the patient to remain in this drug-free environment for at least five months. Then he is on his own.

Against all the odds, some persons are cured. One of them founded Narcotics Anonymous after he had been to Lexington eight times. Another one is now a public official in his home town. And there is one man who owns a small business on the West Coast and telephones Lexington every Christmas Eve to express his thanks.

Bad as the narcotics problem is in the United States today, there was a time when it threatened to engulf the nation. Around 1913-14 one American out of every 400 was an addict of some kind. Chinese imported into the West Coast as laborers brought their opium pipes along, and the habit spread eastward across the nation. Opium was given to Civil

War wounded to ease their pain, and hundreds of thousands of addicts were created on the battle fields.

There was no law against any opiate drug in the United States, and thousands of persons became addicts by taking patent medicines heavily loaded with opium. The invention of the hypodermic needle in 1853 made it easy to shoot narcotics straight into the blood stream.

Then occurred a tragic medical mistake. In 1898 the Germans began the commercial production of heroin, which is an opium derivative, and it was hailed as a miracle drug and recommended as a cure for persons addicted to opium and morphine. Actually heroin is three times as powerful as morphine. For five years heroin was pumped into persons seeking a cure for drug addiction before an article ap-

pearing in the Alabama Medical Journal in 1903 challenged the theory that heroin was a cure.

By 1914 the devil was loose all across the United States and the underworld had discovered there was a big business in selling adulterated heroin. The result was the first action on the part of the federal government—the passage of the Harrison Narcotics Act in 1914. It allows the fed-

eral government to license drugs for medical purposes and to war against the illegal transportation and sale of narcotics.

Under a Supreme Court decision of last year addiction itself is not a crime. Possession of narcotics is punishable by imprisonment for from two to 10 years for a first offender. Five years is the mandatory minimum sentence for selling drugs. For subsequent

offenses prison sentences range up to 40 years and a person who sells to anybody under 18 years of age can get the death penalty at the discretion of the jury.

The result is that addiction is on the decline in the United States, but a new peril has risen and the Federal Narcotics Bureau is helpless to do anything about it.

(Next: Goof balls, bennies and the doctors' dilemma.)

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