

Drugs

Heroin racket — It's here

Editor's note: Lee Quarnstrom and Marj Von B. have spent several weeks researching the problem of heroin addiction in Santa Cruz County and nearby areas. In a series of articles they will explore this problem.

By LEE QUARNSTROM
and MARJ VON B.

Heroin. Also known as smack, H, schmeck, stuff and by other names:

Invented as a painkiller which, it was thought, lacked the addictive quality of morphine, heroin is also derived from the opium poppy.

Yet today thousands, perhaps millions, of addicts in all corners of the United States as well as throughout the world inject the substance into their veins, seeking relief from pains and troubles, maintaining habits that take terrible tolls physically, psychologically and financially.

Addicts steal and rob to obtain funds to support heroin habits often costing well over \$100 a day.

Addicts sell to other addicts, hoping to make enough profit to maintain their own needs.

Some addicts "turn their old ladies out," forcing their wives, often addicts themselves, to sell their bodies as prostitutes to make enough money to support their addictions.

Tons of heroin are smuggled into the United States each year, most of it reportedly coming from Turkey, via refineries in France and connections in Latin America. More heroin is said to be coming from Southeast Asia. And Mexican heroin, supposedly refined in the city of Culiacan, Sinaloa, finds its way into this country and finds its way to Watsonville and other Monterey Bay Area communities.

Mexican heroin, which is brown because of refinement process, is more common in Central California than is the white stuff, which comes from the Mideast and Orient. But Oriental heroin is also available to those who prefer it. The quality of each type of heroin is said to be similar, with differences occurring only when the percentage of the drug is varied by cutting, or diluting, with other substances, such as dextrose (milk sugar).

International efforts have been attempted to stem the flow of heroin into the United States. But still it comes. It is a seller's market: junkies need their fixes and the profits in the heroin business are so high that bribes and elaborate smuggling schemes are written off as overhead.

Efforts on the federal level are being stepped up to deal with the heroin problem. But the use of the drug is said to be on the increase, in epidemic proportions in some areas.

And in local areas, such as Santa Cruz County, worried parents, teachers, politicians and public health officials have been trying, often without much success, to develop programs to treat addicts and, more importantly, to prevent the increase of new addicts. Use of the drug often has been reported among poor minority groups. Now its use is being seen more and more often among white, middle-class youngsters.

Why do people take heroin? Why do they condemn themselves to lives of desperate addiction?

Experts and addicts really don't know all the answers.

Avram Goldstein, head of the Stanford University department of pharmacology and a world-renowned expert on the use of

Methadone, a synthetic heroin substitute, says heroin is a tranquilizing agent.

"It's a shortcut way of solving problems," Dr. Goldstein says.

Junkies, who call themselves "hypes" (because heroin is injected with an "outfit" which includes a hypodermic needle), say they experienced great pleasure when they first started to use the drug. Some say it acted as a panacea for problems, physical, spiritual and psychological.

One prominent drug expert says he thinks there are some persons for whom heroin is a specific medication which makes them feel "normal."

Bob Campos, who is soon leaving UCSC Extension to take a post with Dr. Goldstein at Stanford, likens the use of heroin by such people to the use of insulin by diabetics.

"There are persons who live for many years without knowing they suffer from diabetes," Campos says. "Then their condition is diagnosed and they start injecting insulin. After living for years feeling crummy all the time they suddenly, for the first times in their lives, start feeling normal. I suspect that the same thing happens to some persons the first time they inject heroin. This leads me to think that there will always be a certain proportion of the population which will be addicted to heroin."

Campos says heroin creates addiction by causing certain cell changes within the bodies of users. But these changes require a steady flow of the drug to maintain themselves, and a sudden stop of the flow causes the addict to suffer intense pains throughout his body. Therefore, the addict seeks more heroin to stop the pains and to seek the drowsy pleasure which the drug encourages.

Watsonville has had for years the reputation as a major supply center for heroin. Addicts from as far away as San Francisco have headed here when their local sources of supply run dry. And, it seems, the Watsonville area is still a major distribution point for the drug.

The use of the drug among young, white Santa Cruz residents is not thought to be as common as among Chicanos in Watsonville, Prunedale, Castroville, Gilroy, Salinas and Soledad. But use of the drug in these latter areas is by no means confined to Chicanos.

However, the mechanics of the heroin business in this region — the area bounded by Watsonville, Gilroy, the Salinas Valley and Castroville — is said to be controlled by Mexican Americans. Much of the heroin smuggled into this area comes from Mexico.

Sometimes the heroin is merely smuggled across the border, perhaps hidden in a woman's girdle. Other times larger amounts come in, some say, after border guards are bribed.

There are reports from those who know that heroin occasionally arrives in Watsonville in kilo lots. A kilogram is 2.2 pounds and is said to cost \$15,000 in Tijuana. It is cut many times before distribution to addicts. The profit on a kilo is enormous.

How many addicts are there here?

Estimates vary. Ray Belgard, chief investigator for the district attorney's office, says he thinks there are fewer than 200 addicts in Santa Cruz County. But Ron Lang, who heads the county's drug abuse program, uses the figure of 1,200 addicts in operating his program. Harry Richardson, head of the Do It Now Foundation — an organization aimed at rehabilitating addicts — estimates there are between 200 and 300 heroin users in the county. And a Watsonville addict says there are probably 1,000 addicts in the Watsonville-Prunedale-Salinas-Castroville area.

Who supplies the heroin? Who is involved in the heroin traffic?

Junkies are very reluctant to talk about this subject. And with good reason: they know they would jeopardize their own lives by naming names.

One addict paints a picture of a hierarchy of drug sellers operating throughout the Chicano communities from Watsonville south. In this hierarchy the "street junkie" is at the very bottom, scamming and stealing to support his habit. He buys from a dealer who makes enough to support his own habit. But this dealer, too, buys from another dealer who, in turn, buys from someone. And as you go up the ladder the big moneymakers at the top are completely insulated, not only free of the dirty business of selling to addicts but free of the possibility of mistakenly selling to an undercover agent.