

## Caught in a Drug Trap.

*Veteran cop who once believed drug addiction was a crime now sees it as misery.*



**T**he kid used to be a regular pain in the neck, one of those big, healthy teenage-boy types who don't mind giving the police a hard time.

Now look at him, thin and hollow-eyed and too sick to fight with anybody.

Victoria Police Sgt. Dan Parker has seen it happen over and over, the slide into drug addiction.

Last time he saw the kid, he was living with his skinny girlfriend in the Holiday Court Motel, on Hillside Avenue at the edge of Victoria's downtown.

The years have changed Parker. Once he believed that drug addiction was a crime. Now he believes that it's misery, visited upon people who may not be able to get out from under it.

"I've been doing this since 1982," says Parker. "I've arrested hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people for buying, selling and using drugs. And I could go out there and arrest the same people today, because they're still doing it."

The essence of a drug addiction is your body's demand for a certain substance regardless of whether you want to provide it. Heroin, for instance, builds a permanent receptor in your brain that requires an opiate for regular functioning. Cocaine empties out your body's natural dopamine supplies.

If it's nicotine or alcohol or any number of drugs that your doctor can get you, lucky break - your addiction is legal. It will be costly, damaging and potentially lethal, but you will be allowed to pursue it.

If it's heroin, cocaine or a variety of other illicit drugs, however, you will be left to buy and use your drugs in the shadows. You'll either hide your addiction or risk losing home, job and family.

### **Drugs: Harm-reduction strategy gets the law out of addicts' way**

You'll live wherever you can after the money runs out, often a rooming house or motel too shabby for anyone else. And you'll steal, deal and sell sexual acts, because there's no other way to pay for your drugs. "It's not the heroin that kills you, it's the lifestyle," says Parker.

There are an estimated 70,000 injection drug users in Canada and more than a fifth of them live in B.C., almost exclusively on the coast. Three-quarters of the province's 15,000 users live in the Vancouver area; 2,000 live in the capital region. Compare that to Edmonton, which has almost three times the population of the capital region but proportionately fewer users, an estimated 4,300.

B.C. medical health officer Dr. Perry Kendall says every Canadian community "has its downtown eastsides to a degree" but acknowledges that Victoria and Vancouver have more users than most.

Perhaps it's the West Coast weather. More likely it's because drugs are cheaper and more widely available in port cities - the price of cocaine has remained relative stable in B.C. over the past 20 years at around \$2,200 an ounce, but an ounce of virtually pure heroin has plummeted in the same period to about \$2,500 from \$20,000.

Addiction has little to do with questions of morality beyond lingering puritan illusions of standing strong against pleasure. But our laws are nonetheless morality-based, springing from the belief that those who succumb to certain kinds of drugs are of weak and disreputable character and thus deserving of punishment, even death.

"You say 'heroin addict' and people picture slaving criminals," says Parker. "They don't see that these people are sick. They can't get out of it that easy. So why, as a policeman, am I out here trying to put them in jail?"

It's an expensive strategy. B.C. spends more than \$78 million a year on law enforcement resulting from illicit drug use and another \$17 million on health care, former provincial health officer Dr. John Millar found in a 1997 study. If the province did nothing but increase the availability of methadone, a heroin substitute, it could save up to \$30 million.

There are arguably no solutions if our goal is to eradicate drug use - as long as people are sad and somebody can figure out a way to make money from it, there will be addiction. But there are other goals to aim for, like improved health care and humanity. The buzzword is harm reduction, which means you get the law out of the way of sick people and provide clean needles and a place to use them, sometimes even supplying the drugs. Frankfurt, Germany has been unfolding such a strategy over the past decade, and Switzerland is now maintaining heroin addicts on heroin.

In Liverpool, where the city hasn't done anything much other than to hand out free heroin, related crime has dropped. Weary Vancouverites seem to be looking for options as well: a poll taken last month found 61 per cent support for the medical use of heroin.

The benefit of harm reduction to those who are addicted is obvious; no more subterfuge, desperation, jail time and squalor. Those who want treatment are shown the way. Those who want methadone, deemed more socially acceptable, are given it. Those who continue to use cocaine and heroin at least know what they're getting and aren't spreading disease.

The benefits to the rest of us are less crime, lower policing and court costs, better health and the comfort of knowing that we aren't singling out people for torment. "These people don't want to break into your cars and houses," says Mark Townsend, executive director of Vancouver's Portland Hotel. "They're just addicted."

The Portland Hotel opened last summer partly to house the estimated five per cent of users who will never shake their addictions (one resident has been through treatment eight times).

## **HEROIN FACTS**

**What it is:** A derivative of the opium poppy. Heroin is synthesized from morphine and converts back to morphine in the body.

**Where it comes from:** Southeast Asia, occasionally Mexico.

**Routes to Victoria:** Every direction

**Common single-use size:** One-tenth of a gram, known as a "point"

**How it's used:** Smoked, snorted and injected

**Price:** \$25 a point, quarter gram \$50-\$60, half gram \$90-\$100

**Daily cost of a high-end**

The non-profit hotel essentially gives the city's "hard-to-house" a place to live no matter what, a function largely filled by the privately run Holiday Court in this city.

There's methadone available on site at the Portland - "I wish there was heroin, too," says Townsend - outreach services as needed, nutritional help and staff who understand that living with drug addiction, mental illness and sorrowful pasts can make for difficult tenancy sometimes.

"If your daughter came home pregnant, just about the worst thing you could do to her would be to throw her out. But you'll see that done with addicted all the time," says Townsend. "If every five minutes you're having to face finding another place to stay, being evicted, having to move on - that can take up a lot of energy. You spend all your time worrying about where you'll live."

The region needs expanded drug treatment. We have 20 detox beds for adults in the capital region and a week's wait to get into one, and little halfway-style housing for those dangerous months after detox. We need better prevention, because the kids are no longer listening. Parker still shakes his head thinking of the university students he has talked to who believe they can't get addicted if they only smoke heroin.

We need new laws that pave the way for addiction to be viewed as a health issue and not a crime. And we need compassion, for all those who set out to ease their pain and get lost along the way. "There's no simple solution to the pain human beings feel and how they deal with it," says Townsend. "But there are solutions to leaving people to die like animals."

We will not wipe out drug use and addiction. There isn't even any certainty that all of the things we try will work. But one thing's for sure: almost anything will be better than what we're doing now.

"We've tried it this way for a while," says Parker. "I personally haven't seen a lot of change. So maybe we should try something else."

The war on drugs was lost a long, long time ago. It's time to free the prisoners. ...by Jody Paterson - Times Colonist.

habit: \$300

## COCAINE FACTS

What it is: An alkaloid extracted from the leaves of the coca plant.

Normally a powder, but can be smoked as crack cocaine if the drug is first heated in a baking soda solution.

Where it comes from: South America

Routes into Victoria: Through the U.S., often straight up Interstate 5

Common single-use size: One-quarter of a gram

How it's used: Smoked, snorted and injected

Price: \$20 for one-quarter gram, \$200 for a 3.5-gram "8-ball"

Daily cost of a high-end habit: \$400 and up