

A journey into and out of heroin addiction

Professor David Clark begins his look at an imaginary, but all too real, heroin-using career, preceding his forthcoming Briefings on treatment.

Before I start writing about treatment in future Briefings, it is important to look at the nature of the problem with which we are dealing.

Addiction is a multi-faceted problem, involving psychological, biological and sociological aspects. Addiction is about people's lives. It is about their substance-using careers.

There are an infinite number of pathways in to and out of addiction. Here, I start to look at one person's life, an imaginary life drawn from the lives of many people I have met or heard about. In later Briefings, we will consider what we can learn from Lydia's life as a heroin addict, and as a recovering/recovered heroin addict, in order to help other people.

Lydia had a happy early life until her parents split, her mother remarried, and her stepfather started abusing her sexually. She lost touch with her father, and her mother would not accept that anything untoward was happening in the house.

The sexual abuse continued from age nine to 13, and left a long-lasting emotional impact on Lydia. She became withdrawn at school and her work deteriorated. Nobody outside the family could understand what was underlying these latter problems.

Lydia used solvents at age 12, and then cannabis and amphetamines soon after. She was introduced to heroin when she was 15. The drug initially had a huge impact on her, since it seemed to remove her from all her problems.

She had met a 'nice' group of people whose major preoccupation was using heroin. They understood her problems and accepted her for who she was. Lydia had felt alienated from normal society and found she could easily fit in with this group.

Initially, Lydia used heroin only occasionally, but the effects of the drug were so powerful in helping her deal with her emotional problems, she came to look forward to using. She became one of the 'group' and at this stage they provided her with the drug. She met an understanding boy, Tom, who became her boyfriend.

At this stage, Lydia started to lose contact with some of her old friends and became more detached from her mother, who had other things on her mind.

Lydia could justify her heroin use to herself because the drug, and the people she shared her experiences with, served an important emotional need. Eventually, she fell out with her parents



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and went to live with Tom in a squat. She was 16.

The amount of heroin that Lydia was using increased as tolerance developed. There was no real reason to stop using heroin – it had become part of life without really thinking about it. The

whole experience was still enjoyable.

Up to now, Tom and Lydia were smoking the drug, but Tom started injecting. On one occasion, the couple could not get heroin and Lydia experienced withdrawal for the first time. At first, she thought she had a dose of flu, but when the symptoms disappeared after she used heroin, she realised that this was the 'cluck' that her friends had talked about.

Lydia had always felt she should refrain from injecting, because she felt that one could easily get addicted. She also did not like the thought of injecting herself.

However, one day she was with a group of people who were all injecting. She felt that she could not decline using in this way. She was not forced to inject, but it was easier to just agree – just this once. Someone injected the drug for her.

Eventually, Lydia decided that she should reduce the amount of heroin she was using because she was now paying for it, so she started to inject regularly. Tolerance continued to develop.

Lydia was able to justify her continued use because she needed to feel good, other friends were doing it, etc. She also explained to herself that her deteriorating appearance and physical condition, and detachment from society, were not a problem. They were a small price to pay for a new life and the status and reputation she now had in her group.

Lydia soon reached a stage where she could not afford her heroin habit, so she started to shoplift to be able to buy heroin. There was a lot to learn to be able to do this successfully – and she had to adapt to taking up a behaviour that she would never have agreed with in her earlier life. But the culture of which she was part – her heroin-using friends – helped her along.

Lydia's identity was changing – she was becoming more immersed in the culture, and she was engaged in criminal activities. She was also becoming more selfish and her thoughts were much more focused on getting money to be able to buy heroin. And, lo and behold, she now had a full-time job.

Life with heroin was not easy. Lydia had to learn to hustle to survive. She began to realise that that the Lydia of the old days was disappearing. The range of choices she had in her younger days was becoming far more limited. At times, she now experienced periods of low self-esteem.