

The drug experience: heroin, part 2

In his latest Background Briefing, Professor David Clark describes the initial experiences of heroin users who go on to have their lives seriously affected by their drug use.

Heroin can have a devastating effect on human lives, although as we described in the last article, evidence indicates that it has this impact on only a minority of people who first try the drug.

In this Briefing, we start to describe the experiences of people whose lives are seriously affected by heroin. The experiences are based on those described in the seminal book *Beating the Dragon* by James McIntosh and Neil McKeganey, and our own research with clients on the Peterborough Nene Drug Interventions Programme.

The majority of people in these studies committed crimes to fund their heroin habits. In fact, the Peterborough project recruited many of the highest level offenders in Peterborough. However, we emphasise that this does not mean that all people who take heroin commit crimes.

Many people who use heroin describe a steady progression from use of legal substances (alcohol, solvents), through to softer drugs such as cannabis and then on to heroin.

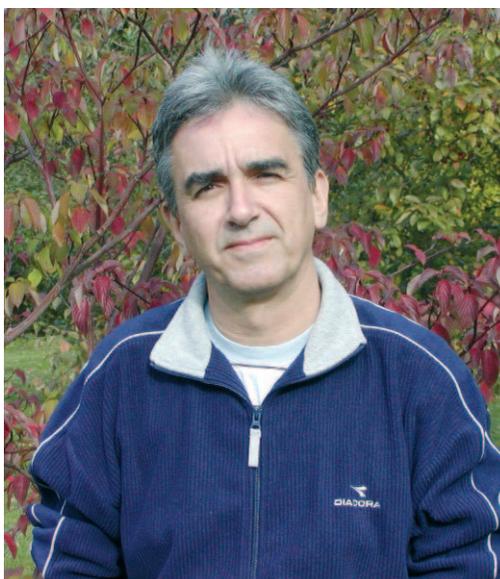
The most frequently cited reasons for trying heroin are curiosity and a desire to comply with the expectations of others, particularly of a peer group. However, there is little indication that heroin users are pressurised to take the drug for the first time – the vast majority feel that they have made their own decision.

However, this decision is often not well-informed. Many of our interviewees emphasised that they were naïve about the effects of heroin before they first tried the drug. Some believed that it was no worse than other drugs; others were not even aware that they were trying heroin.

Some people admit to not thinking about the consequences of their actions, and in fact do not think much about their drug use at all. Many others, when they first start taking heroin, are confident that they will not become addicted. A common belief is that, 'addiction is not something that could happen to me; it happens to other people'.

Many of our interviewees discussed the ease of availability and frequent exposure to various substances, including heroin. Drugs were rife on the housing estates in Peterborough on which some of our interviewees had been brought up.

Many people who first try heroin will say that they experienced a feeling of great relaxation and detachment from the outside world. They may feel drowsy, experience a clouding of mental functioning, and feelings of warmth (from dilation of blood vessels). They may also experience feelings of euphoria, particularly after intravenous injection.



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Heroin also reduces anxiety and emotional pain – it helps people escape from reality.

There is a reduction in respiration, heart rate and pupil size. Many first time users feel sick and vomit, although this vomiting is often not enough to stop them using again, as the pleasurable effects far outweigh this negative side effect. This vomiting subsides in many people after the first few experiences of heroin.

Many first-time users try the drug again because they enjoyed the first experience. Others, some of whom may even have had a bad initial experience, continue taking the drug because they remain in the same social circles that led them to their first use.

Some people very rapidly move towards daily use of the drug, while others may continue to use on a periodic basis over a period of weeks or months. Our Peterborough sample, whose lives were badly affected by heroin, all ended up using the drug daily.

Heroin users develop a tolerance to the drug, such that increasing amounts of the drug must be taken in order to achieve the same positive effects. This tolerance results in the drug habit becoming more costly. Some users will shift from smoking heroin to injecting the drug because the same effects can be achieved with much smaller amounts of the drug.

They may also start injecting the drug as part of a continued desire to experiment and to find new 'highs'. As part of this process of finding new 'highs', some people use multiple drugs, sometimes at the same time. Use of benzodiazepines, legally and illegally obtained, is common among heroin users.

Many heroin users recognise the decision to inject as having been a significant step in their drug using career. Injecting is an invasive process that heightens the risk of overdose and introduces additional risks such as contracting HIV, Hepatitis C and other blood-borne infections.

Often, these are not the factors that make people reluctant to start injecting. Rather, they appear to be apprehensive about the actual process of injecting. Many users have a fear of injections and, of course, generally people do not know how to inject. Other users help first-time injectors and continue to do so until the latter person feels confident in the process.

There are variations in individuals' experiences when they first inject heroin. Many people experience a pronounced euphoria almost immediately after injection. Other people do not experience this rush, while others report feeling very ill.

However, many of those who initially have negative experiences continue to persevere taking the drug and eventually became intravenous drug users.

In our next Background Briefing, we will continue to look at the experiences of those people whose lives are seriously affected by heroin, focusing first on the withdrawal syndrome.

Recommended Reading:
Aimee Hopkins and David Clark (2005) Using Heroin, Trying to Stop and Accessing Treatment.
www.wiredinitiative.com/pdf/Nene1.pdf
James McIntosh and Neil McKeganey (2002) Beating the Dragon: The Recovery from Dependent Drug Use. Prentice Hall.
Tam Stewart (1996) The Heroin Users. Rivers Oram Press.