

Historical Perspectives: Cocaine

Professor David Clark traces the history of cocaine, linking the Incas, Freud, Thomas Edison, Sherlock Holmes and Coca Cola.

Cocaine is extracted from the leaf of a small tree known as the coca (Erythroxylum coca), which is native to South America.

Coca leaves have been found in burial chambers in Peru dating back to 2500 B.C. The Incas started to use coca around the tenth century. It was a sacred drug, used primarily by priests and nobility for special ceremonies. 'Mama coca' was thought to have grown from the remains of a beautiful woman.

When Spaniards first conquered the Incas they banned coca use for religious reasons. However, the Spanish soon found advantages of the drug, although they did not use it themselves. Incas would work harder and longer, as well as eat less, if allowed to chew coca. The Roman Catholic church dropped objections to coca, since it became rich by charging a tithe – one tenth of the value of any crop.

The coca plant was virtually unknown in Europe until the nineteenth century. European naturalists exploring Peru started to experiment with the drug. Although coca was transported to Europe it was not used, probably because of deterioration of samples, as well as an aversion to chewing the leaves.

The active ingredient was identified and isolated by Albert Niemann in Germany in 1860. He called it cocaine. In 1883, Aschenbradt wrote an article describing the usefulness of cocaine for exhaustion, alleviating pain, and enabling sick soldiers to continue to function.

Freud saw this article and tried cocaine. He extolled the virtues of the drug in an article entitled 'Uber Coca'. He claimed that cocaine could be used to increase a person's physical capacity during stressful times, to restore mental capacity decreased by fatigue, to alleviate depression, to treat gastric disorders, asthma, and morphine and alcohol problems.

Freud treated his friend Ernst von Fleischl-Marxow for nervous exhaustion resulting from morphine withdrawal. In *Uber Coca* (1884), Freud stated: 'The treatment of morphine addiction with coca does not, therefore, result merely in the exchange of one kind of addiction for another – it does not turn the morphine addict into a conqueror; the use of coca is only temporary.'

Fleischl was eventually consuming a gram a day and became the first European cocaine addict. He suffered



paranoid delusions and the formication syndrome (feeling of bugs crawling under the skin).

There was a cocaine epidemic in the 1880s and the drug was injected by the upper middle class. Robert Louis Stevenson used cocaine while writing 'The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde'. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes injected cocaine. In 1910, *Current*

Literature stated that cocaine was responsible for the smooth and flowing sentences characteristic of the period.

In 1887, US Surgeon General, Dr William Hammond, recommended that cocaine be used for the treatment of depression. He asserted that there was no such thing as a 'cocaine habit'. Freud claimed that only those who had previously used morphine became dependent on cocaine.

As a result of the interest of Freud and others, the production of cocaine by the German drug company Merck

Coca-Cola originally contained cocaine and was advertised as 'the brain tonic and intellectual soda-fountain beverage'.

increased by 0.4 kilo in 1883 to 83,343 kilograms in 1885. Prices rose dramatically. Drug manufacturers strove to improve their supply of coca leaves.

Freud has been strongly criticised for his falsified data, lying about treatment, resolute management of his own reputation, and persuasive blame of others for his own shortcomings.

In 1863, Angelo Mariani, a Corsican chemist, patented Vin Mariani which contained coca. Advertisements included testimonials from Thomas Edison, Robert Louis Stevenson, Jules Verne, President Ulysses S. Grant and Pope Leo XIII.

Coca-Cola originally contained cocaine and was advertised as 'the brain tonic and intellectual soda-fountain beverage'.

Cocaine became available in Europe and America in a variety of other preparations marketed by reputable companies. Medical opinion stated that only those who lacked willpower became a regular user of the drug.

An advertisement for Metcalf's Wine of Coca stated: 'Public speakers, singers and actors have found wine of coca to be a valuable tonic to the vocal cords. Athletes, pedestrians, and baseball players have found by practical experience that a steady course of coca taken both before and after any trial of strength or endurance will impart energy to every movement, and prevent fatigue. Elderly people have found it a reliable aphrodisiac superior to any other drug.'

Casualties began to emerge – overdose, cocaine psychosis, severe dependence – and opinion started to change. Writing describing the case of Annie Meyers was influential: 'I deliberately took a pair of shears and prised loose a tooth that was filled with gold. I then extracted the tooth, smashed it up, and the gold went to the nearest pawnshop (the blood streaming down my face and drenching my clothes) where I sold it for 80 cents.'

The moralistic propaganda of the temperance movement began to include anti-drug statements. In the early decades of the twentieth century, cocaine (and cannabis) were stigmatised in America for their association with poor labourers drawn from ethnic minorities. They sniffed cocaine because they could not afford needles, distinguishing them from doctors, lawyers and middle classes who injected the drug.

In 1903, the American Pharmacological Association reported that 'almost every coloured prostitute and a few white women are addicted to cocaine'.

In 1914, the Harrison Narcotic Act in the US effectively banned the use of opium, morphine and cocaine.