

# A survey of 47 opiate dependent persons who sought treatment

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## Introduction

THE PROBLEM OF drug abuse is a universal one that is both a social and a medical disease that has spread rapidly in the past decade. While the growth of this disease has been dramatic in itself the increase in the incidence of opiate dependence has been indeed phenomenal. The U.K. Home office figures for the decade 1959-68 show that in U.K. in 1959 there was no registered users of opiates below the age of 20 in 1964 there were 753 (of which 342 were Heroin users). In 1968 the figure was 2782 (2240 using Heroin). While such early figures for Malaysia are not readily available a recent survey (E. Tan, 1972) concludes that there is an increasing demand for medical treatment of drug dependence mainly from Narcotic users.

V. Navaratnam (1975) in a preliminary report of the problem in the state of Penang states that nearly 90% of the patients he interviewed abused either Heroin or Morphine or both. The opiate of choice was Heroin.

With drug abuse becoming a major problem the Malaysian government in September 1975 set up a number of treatment (or detoxifying) centres and rehabilitation centres under the Welfare Ministry with a view to combatting this growing threat to society. The University Hospital's Psychological Medicine Unit has since its inception in 1967 been treating a number of drug dependent persons in its psychiatric Unit. By and large most of these persons are dependent on opiates and it is this category of dependence that this paper intends to study.

## Aim of Study

To study characteristics of opiate dependent persons and their dependence among all opiate addicts admitted to and treated in the male ward of the Psychological Medicine Unit of the University Hospital from 1st January 1975 to 31st December 1975. The study concentrates on characteristics such as age, ethnic group, types of opiates used, family characteristics and marital and employment status.

## Method

All medical case notes of (47) persons who were admitted for treatment of opiate dependence during the period of the survey were reviewed and data collected and analysed two months or more after their discharge from the ward.

## Treatment of opiate dependence

All known opiate abusers who are admitted to the Unit undergo a period of testing of their motivation on an outpatient basis where they are seen regularly on at least two occasions. During this period they are treated with tranquillisers which help them reduce but not necessarily withdraw their dependence of the opiates they have been abusing. All patients who fulfill this motivational test are admitted for inpatient withdrawal from their opiate dependence.

## Treatment

Treatment consists of withdrawal and psychological treatment including family therapy where indicated or possible. Withdrawal is by controlled substitution by use of Methadone. For the first

24 hours of the patient's admission to the ward he is given 5 mg Methadone when needed (PRN) and in this way the total Methadone he needs in a 24 hour period ascertained. The next day this total dose is given in equally divided doses and on subsequent days this dose is gradually reduced 5 mg at a time until he is completely withdrawn from the drug. He is then observed for 2-3 days in the ward and discharged for follow-up as an outpatient. At the time of this survey (1975) there were no government rehabilitation centres for drug addicts.

## Results and Discussion

### The Person

**Age:** Of the 47 opiate dependent persons treated in the male ward 32 or (68%) were below the age of 25 and 41 (87%) below the age of 30. The largest number 24 (51%) were between the ages 21-25. The youngest was a 15 year old boy. (See Figure 1).

### Ethnic Group

By ethnic groups the largest number of opiate addicts were Chinese 24 (51%) followed by Malays 17 (36%) and Indians 4 (8.5%). However most of the Malays were below 25 years old (15 out of 17) whereas only 14 out of 24 of the Chinese were below 25 years of age. One American and one Eurasian were also treated in 1975 for opiate dependence. (See Figure 1).

### Marital Status

Most of the 47 addicts were single 36 (76%) while the rest 11 (23%) were married.

### Employment

While the general picture held by most lay people of a drug addict is that of an unemployed youth this study does not support that view. Thirty-two (68%) out of 47 addicts were fully employed, one held a part time job and 3 were students (2 school boys and one a University student). Only 11 (23%) were unemployed.

### Occupation

Thirty-six (76%) were skilled or semi-skilled. Only 2 held an unskilled job. Of the rest 3 were professionals, three students, and 3 held clerical jobs.

### His Family

The need to understand the background an addict comes from is important from the sociological as well as management points of view. The data on this was not easily available but the study revealed that the addict often came from difficult if not problem homes.

### Size of Family

Thirty five (74%) out of 47 addicts came from families with 5 or more children and therefore would be considered large families.

Fig. 1  
1975 - Opiate Dependent Males - Age/Ethnic Group Relationships

Age Groups in Years	ETHNIC GROUPS														
	Malay		Chinese		Indian Pak., Cey. (excl. Sikhs)		Sikh		Caucasian		Eurasian		Total		
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
10 - 15	1	2.13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.13
16 - 20	2	4.26	4	8.51	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.13	7	14.89	
21 - 25	12	25.53	10	21.28	1	2.13	1	2.13	0	0	0	0	24	51.06	
26 - 30	0	0	8	17.02	0	0	0	0	1	2.13	0	0	9	19.15	
31 - 35	2	4.26	1	2.13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	6.38	
36 - 40	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.13	0	0	0	0	1	2.13	
41 - 45	0	0	1	2.13	0	0	1	2.13	0	0	0	0	2	4.26	
46	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Total	17	36.17	24	51.06	1	2.13	3	6.38	1	2.13	1	2.13	47	100.00	

**Fig. 2(a)**  
1975 - Opiate Dependent Males - Marital Status

Marital Status	No.	%
Single	36	76.60
Married	11	23.40
Total	47	100.00

**Fig. 2(b)**  
1975 - Opiate Dependent Males - Occupation

Occupation	No.	%
Professional	3	6.38
Skilled Workers	21	44.68
Semi-skilled Workers	18	38.30
Unskilled Workers	2	4.26
Student	3	6.38
Total	47	100.00

### Sibship

An abnormally large number of the addicts were within the first 4 in their families. Twenty one (44%) of them were either first or second in their families and a full 38 (80%) of them within the first four in their families. The traditional pressure on the elder male siblings on any Asian family may be a contributory factor to the large number of addicts

**Fig. 2(c)**  
1975 - Opiate Dependent Males - Employment Status

Employment	No.	%
Full-time	32	68.09
Part-time	1	2.13
Unemployed	11	23.40
Students	3	6.38
Total	47	100.00

who fall in this category. Sibling rivalry may also be a contributory factor though this factor was not looked for in this study.

### Absence of Parent or Parents

The established role of parents in moulding an adolescent's life is well documented. In this group of 47 addicts, 21 (44.7%) had an absence (prolonged or permanent) of one or both parents (absence of father 16 (34%), absence of mother 2 (4.3%) and both parents 3 (6.4%).

### Poor Family Relationships

Poor family relationships were noted in 13 (27%) out of the 47 addicts. Of these 5 did not get on well with father, 4 with wife and 2 with step mother or mother. Two others had poor relationships with more than one relative.

**Fig. 3**

1975 - Opiate Dependent Males - The Family Background

Size of Family			Sibship of Drug Addict			Poor Family Relationships			Absence of Parent Figure(s) for 3 or More Years. Before Age of 18		
No. of Family Members	No.	%	Sibship	No.	%	Family Member	No.	%	Parent	No.	%
Less than 5	12	25.53	1st	11	23.40	Father	5	10.64	Father	16	34.04
						Mother	2	4.26	Mother	2	4.26
5 - 8	25	53.19	2nd	10	21.28	Wife	4	8.51	Both	3	6.38
						4th	10	21.28	2 or more members	2	4.26
9 - 12	10	21.28	5th - 10th	9	19.15				No significant problem	34	72.34
						Total	47	100.00	Total	47	100.00

## His Addiction

### Preferred Opiate by Age Groups

(See Figure 4.) Of the 47 addicts 37 (78.7%) smoked Heroin, 6 (12.77%) Morphine, 2 (4.26%) Opium and 2 (4.26%) took more than one type of opiate.

The Heroin takers were mostly in the under 25 age group (30 (63.82%)) while Opium and Morphine dependent addicts were above 26 years old (6

(12.77%)). Of the 15 addicts above the age of 26 only 7 were Heroin addicts and the rest dependent on Morphine, Opium or more than one opiate.

### How did they start the habit

(See Figure 5.) Thirty nine (82.8%) of the 47 addicts started their habit out of curiosity or "for fun" when introduced by friends. Only 3 (6.38%) said pushers first introduced them to drugs. One

Fig. 4

1975 - Opiate Dependent Males - Age/Opiate Relationships

Age Groups in Years	OPIATE OF DEPENDENCE									
	Herion		Morphine		Opium		Mixed		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
10 - 15	1	2.13	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.13
16 - 20	6	12.77	1	2.13	0	0	0	0	7	14.89
21 - 25	23	48.94	0	0	1	2.13	0	0	24	51.06
26 - 30	3	6.38	4	8.51	0	0	2	4.26	9	19.15
31 - 35	3	6.38	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	6.38
36 - 40	0	0	1	2.13	0	0	0	0	1	2.13
41 - 45	1	2.13	0	0	1	2.13	0	0	2	4.26
46	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	37	78.73	6	12.77	2	4.26	2	4.26	47	100.00

Fig. 5

1975 - Opiate Dependent Males - The Addiction

Source of First Contact		Period of Dependence Before Admission			Days for Withdrawal			Use of Other Drugs			
Source	No.	%	Months	No.	%	No. of Days	No.	%	Drugs	No.	%
Friends	39	82.98	1 - 6	4	8.51	2 - 4	2	4.26	Marijuana	17	36.17
Medical Advice	4	8.51	7 - 12	11	23.40	5 - 7	12	25.53	Other Opiates	5	10.64
Pusher	3	6.38	13 - 18	2	4.26	8 - 10	14	29.79	Methadone	1	2.13
Hospital	1	2.13	19 - 24	9	19.15	11 - 13	5	10.64	None	12	25.52
			25 - 30	2	4.26	14	3	6.38	Unknown	4	8.51
			31 - 36	9	19.15	AOR	11	23.40	Mixed (Opiates, Marijuana, MX pills)	8	17.02
			37	7	14.89						
			Unknown	3	6.38						
Total	47	100.00	Total	47	100.00	Total	47	100.00	Total	47	100.00

started his habit after being prescribed Morphine in hospital for pains following an operation. Four said they were told by friends to take opiates for medicinal purposes for intractable pains for which they could not get relief with proprietary drugs.

#### *Period of dependence before seeking help*

Only 15 (31.91%) sought help within the first year of dependence. The rest came anywhere between a year and 15 years after starting on the opiate.

#### *What it cost the addict*

The amount of money it cost the addict to maintain his habit is but one of the many costs the addict incurs. Among the addicts studied there appeared little relationship between the money spent and the severity of withdrawal symptoms or dosage of methadone used for withdrawal. However, the average amount spent by an addict was about \$10.00 a day but varying between \$3.00 to \$40.00 a day.

#### *Abuse of other addictive or dangerous drugs*

Only 12 had never experimented with other drugs (including other opiates) before becoming dependent on the opiate in question. Among the rest Marijuana was used by 17 of the addicts before present addiction. Only 1 had experimented with Methadone. Five had tried other opiates before becoming dependent. There were 8 who had experimented with more than one other drug. No reliable data was obtained from 4 others.

#### *Dose of Methadone used for withdrawal*

There was a wide variation in the dosage of Methadone used for withdrawal and it bore no relation to the alleged amount money spent on the addiction, e.g., an addict who said he spent \$40.00 a day only took 175 mg of Methadone during 9 days of withdrawal. Whereas another addict who claimed he spent \$3.00 on his habit a day took 32 mg of Methadone over a 14 day period to complete withdrawal.

#### *Discharge at own risk*

During the hospitalisation, 11 (23.40%) of the addicts discharged themselves against medical advice. Of these 7 (14.89%) were Heroin addicts, the rest being Opium (1), Morphine (2) and more than one drugs (1). Six out of these 11 left within 24 hours.

#### *Number of days for withdrawal*

The addicts took anything from 2 – 27 days to be withdrawn from their addiction. Twelve of them took between 5 and 7 days while 14 took 8 – 10 days and 5 took 11 to 13 days to give up their habit. Eleven discharged themselves at their own risk before completing withdrawal.

## **Conclusions and Summary**

This survey of opiate addicts who were admitted to a male psychiatric ward during the year 1975 produced both picture of addiction the addict and his background. The addict is usually a young male Chinese or Malay who has a skilled or semi-skilled job, single and comes from a large family of which he was usually among the first four. He may have poor relationship with his family and may have had an absence of one or both parents during his early life. He smokes Heroin and uses about \$10.00 a day on his habit. He most often started his habit out of curiosity when introduced by friends. He usually sought treatment within two years of starting addiction.

Drug abuse in general and opiate abuse and dependence in particular seems to have grown dramatically in the past 5 years. This brief survey points to the highly vulnerable young population that is open to opiate dependence. The family background especially the absence of one or both parents in 21 out of 47 of the addicted persons appears to point to likely emotional problems in childhood and adolescence. The disproportionately large numbers of addicts who are among the eldest in their generally large families also points to the possible problems of stress that is often seen in the elder males of most Asian families. Large families too that most addicts come from do seem to contribute to emotional problems (be they problems of omission or commission) that the addicts face in childhood and adolescence. These areas would be worthy of further studies to root out possible factors that influence the vulnerability of our young population to opiate addiction.

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