

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR

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Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXIX, Number 133, 4 December 1995 — Page 6 Advertisements Column 1 [ADVERTISEMENT]

Heroin Hell

A Message from Healthwise & Columbia University Health Services

At Student Wellness Day in September, a student, armed with skepticism, stopped by the Healthwise drug information table. He scanned and snapped up a couple of brochures on heroin, with the comment, "Let's see what government lies you're propagating today." Framed by the massive pillars of Low Library over the Wellness Day scene, it could have easily been September 19, 1968, except for a couple of important differences. For one, today's drug education—at least here at Columbia—is out in the open, pushing facts, not Big Brother fear education and baiting tactics to catch users in the act. A second indication that the times have indeed changed, has been heroin's socioeconomic leap from skid row to supermodel status, i.e., the heroin overdose of an upper-middle class, Upper West Sider in August; routine raids on our local Amsterdam Avenue drug mart—the nation's busiest; and this summer's closing of a Greek house—"a haven of illicit drug use," according to an article in *The Columbia Daily Spectator*. Just as the heroin-induced deaths of eight New Yorkers from remarkably pure China Cat fostered national discussion of the drug's impressive return in recent years, so too should these latest high-profile incidents close to our gates inspire open dialogue. Whether you use, abuse, or watch and worry from the sidelines, there's a place for you at the discussion table.

Not from Concentrate

Pulp Fiction wasn't lying about the dark side of heroin when Mia, played by Uma Thurman, snorted very pure smack, thinking that it was cocaine. Vincent, John Travolta's character, no longer had to convince himself to forego having sex with his boss's wife when he discovered her in shock, foaming from the mouth and was without a clue about how to save her life. With the help of his drug-dealing, "never touch-the-stuff," friend, Mia was saved from certain death by the skin of a speeding six-inch syringe straight to the heart. Despite many recent heroin-related tales of tragedy—on screen and off—from the losers in *Fresh*, *Drugstore Cowboy* and *My Own Private Idaho*, to the deaths of actor River Phoenix and singer Kurt Cobain, who shot himself while under the influence of heroin, use of this drug is on the rise and rampage—particularly among teenagers and the thirty-something crowd. New York City health officials can tell that heroin use is up, and that the heroin being sold on our streets is more potent and lethal than ever. Heroin-related emergency room cases rose 31% during the first six months of 1993 compared to the same period just one year earlier.

Why the upward trend in heroin use? The major reasons, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency are the greater availability, higher quality, and cheaper prices. In 1985 street smack was half as pure as, and triple the price of, today's batch. In addition, because its purer, smoking and

snorting the "downtown thing" will do the trick for many, allowing users to forego injecting heroin directly into the bloodstream—an HIV risk factor when needles are shared with an infected person.

P-funked

Many users get high by smoking and sniffing the drug's cooked by-products, or by simply snorting it raw. Others find that real satisfaction can only come via intravenous injection. One-time and occasional use does not necessarily equal abuse. In fact, some "weekend warriors" function quite well when off the drug and on the job. However, heroin's soothing escape, combined with its varied potency and enormous addictive potential, can put casual users on the fast-track to heroin hell.

Rapid addiction to heroin isn't just a problem for intravenous users anymore. According to John Galea, Chief of Ethnography for the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services Street Drug Research Unit, today's purer heroin has led to a huge increase of smokers and snorters showing up at clinics for treatment—53% of the total using population.

Commonly, heroin sold on the streets is not pure heroin. For example, p-funk, a street mixture of heroin and morphine, looks like the pure stuff, but is actually 6,000 times more potent. The Marback's, who lived on the Upper West Side, may not have known the "cut" of their heroin, or were given incorrect information, when Patricia Marback checked-out for good one evening this past summer after using heroin that her husband reportedly bought at 106th & Amsterdam. She was a stockbroker and mother of two.

The Dope

Heroin is a narcotic derivative of morphine, a common pain-killing sedative. The drug was developed in 1898 as a cough suppressant, and is potent and fast-acting because its make-up closely resembles protein bits in the brain, called endorphins, that regulate pain, pleasure and emotion. Pleasure seeking and pain reduction can become an all-consuming way of life, and the reason to live for many heroin users.

Psychological and physical heroin addiction is not easy or cheap to break. Just go inside the head of Mark, 28 and bored, on a dizzying drug buying tour in New York City as chronicled in *Generation H* (*GQ*, September 1995). This article is great read on how heroin can take over a person's life. As for expense, an anonymous young addict talked about the different kind of price he paid for his heroin abuse. In a *Rolling Stone* article he said that it cost his parents \$150,000 for his two-year stay in a private drug treatment center.

Silence Is Not Golden

The goal of Columbia health professionals is to provide resources to help prevent students from approaching scenarios like the ones described here. Information and assistance are available for drug users and abusers and to non-users who are concerned about friends. CU Counseling and Psychological Services: 854-2468; Healthwise (for educational brochures and workshops): 854-5453; Narcotics Anonymous: 929-6262; Narcotics Abuse and Treatment 24-Hour Hotline: (800) 234-0420; Adult Children of Alcoholics Support Group at CU: 854-1512.

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