

A history of opium, from medical to recreational use

As with hemp, opium is mentioned in the Egyptian *Ebers papyrus* (estimated 1550BC), the writings of the early Egyptians and was described as the 'drug of joy' in the Sumerian tablets of the third millennium (Escohtado, 1999; Wright, 2011). As the name suggests, opium became known for its ability to alter mood and has been used for centuries for this purpose. Homer, in *The Odyssey*, written around 800 BC, mentions what is allegedly opium to relieve the depression of Telemachus (the son of Odysseus):

'Helen, meanwhile, the child of Zeus had a happy thought. Into the bowl in which their wine was mixed, she slipped a drug that had the power of robbing grief and anger of their sting and banishing all painful memories. No one who swallowed this dissolved in their wine could shed a single tear that day, even for the death of his mother or father, or if they put his brother or his own son to the sword and he were there to see it done ...' (Homer, 800BC)

The poppy has become well known in the UK for two reasons: as a symbol of bravery in the first world war (and subsequent wars) and for the production of heroin. We tend to associate the illicit trade of opium with the Far East and South America. However, while hemp originated in China, the cultivation of opium began in Europe and the poppy fields of Spain, Greece, Egypt and Mesopotamia are thought to be among the oldest on the planet (Escohtado, 1999). Fossilized poppy seed cakes and poppy pods have been found dating back to Neolithic times in these areas and it is suggested that the poppies from

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Figure 1. Opium Poppy (*Papaver Somniferum*)

Europe contain between two and three times more morphine than those of the Far East.

Medical use

Early physicians such as Hippocrates and Galen recognized the narcotic qualities of opium and explored its use in the treatment of epidemics, 'women's diseases' and internal bleeding. It was also recognized as useful for the treatment of diarrhoea. Galen, one of the most prolific early writers on medicine lists the uses of opium:

'... cures chronic headache, vertigo, deafness, epilepsy, apoplexy, dimness of sight, loss of voice, asthma, coughs of all kinds, spitting of blood, tightness of breath, colic, the lilac poison,

jaundice, hardness of the spleen stone, urinary complaints, fever, dropsies, leprosy, the trouble to which women are subject, melancholy and all pestilences.' (Galen as quoted in Porter and Tiech, 1996)

As with other drugs, opium became associated with religion and religious ceremony and images of the poppy appear in Egyptian art and Roman sculptures. Egyptian Pharaohs were entombed with opium artefacts and the Greek and Roman Gods of sleep, Hypnos and Somnus, were often depicted with poppies.

Opium is extracted from the exudates derived from the seedpods of the opium poppy, *Papaver somniferum* (Figure 1),



and it is the source of many opiates such as morphine, codeine, heroin and laudanum.

Laudanum

Thomas Sydenham, the 17th-century pioneer of English medicine promoted the use of opium and in particular, Laudanum as beneficial to health:

'Among the remedies which it has pleased Almighty God to give to man to relieve his sufferings, none is so universal and so efficacious as opium.'
(Sydenham as quoted in Jay, 2010)

Laudanum, also known as 'tincture of opium' is an alcoholic herbal preparation containing 10% of pure opium alkaloids and it was sold without prescription across the world until the early 20th Century (Jay, 2010) (Figure 2). Laudanum was used for a range of conditions such as headaches, menstrual cramps, general aches and pains, insomnia and anxiety and there are many famous people who have allegedly used it: Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lewis Carroll, De Quincey (who wrote *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*) and Charles Dickens.

Morphine

One of the original uses of opium was for its analgesic properties and it is still used today in the control of pain. Morphine was first isolated from the opium exudates in 1805 by a German pharmacist, Wilhelm Sertürner. Because of its effect of causing a relaxed state of mind, he named it morphium (morphine)—after the Greek god of dreams, Morpheus (Escotado, 1999). On the illicit market, opium gum is filtered into a morphine base and then synthesized into heroin.

Recreational use

There are many references to drugs in literature, art and music throughout history and it was during the Romantic era in the late 18th century into the Victorian era that the line between the medicinal use and recreational use of drugs began to be drawn. Previously, this distinction was blurred and drugs were freely available and often cheaper than alcohol: opium was recommended in home remedy books and nursemaids were advised to give 'cranky babies' laudanum to help them sleep (Jay,

2010). Opium dens were common throughout the world during the 19th Century and, even following laws prohibiting their use, continued until after the second world war. Highlighting of the misery of drug dependency through the arts as well as through scientific study drew attention to the potential effect on public health and led to Laws being passed to restrict their sale, production and use in 1914 (*The Harrison Act*) (Jay, 2010). Despite this Law, the use of illicit substances has continued and following the first world war, morphine (and cocaine) were widely available, particularly in cities throughout the world. This has led to huge crime organizations worldwide and created a 'seedy underworld' of drug trafficking and 'drug pushing' placing the vulnerable at risk of significant harm. Heroin use has become associated with the spread of HIV because of the sharing of needles and its effects are graphically portrayed in the film *Trainspotting* (1996).

Conclusion

Recent evidence suggests that the use of heroin in Britain by young people continues to be rare (Seddon, 2008) and indeed, reported overall drug use has fallen since 2001 in young people (NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2011). Cannabis remains the most common drug reported in adolescents and young adults. Deprivation however, continues to be a factor in drug use and in a climate where there is a high level of unemployment in young people, which may lead to boredom and pleasure-seeking behaviour, it will be important to monitor the levels of drug use in 16–24-year-olds. The street value of heroin has been reported to be as low as £10 per gram in some areas (Martin and Creighton, 2009)



Figure 2. Laudanum bottle

(enough for about 4 hits). While legal drugs like alcohol can be monitored and regulated by law, illicit drugs such as opium are open to those determined to make money whatever the health risks.

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